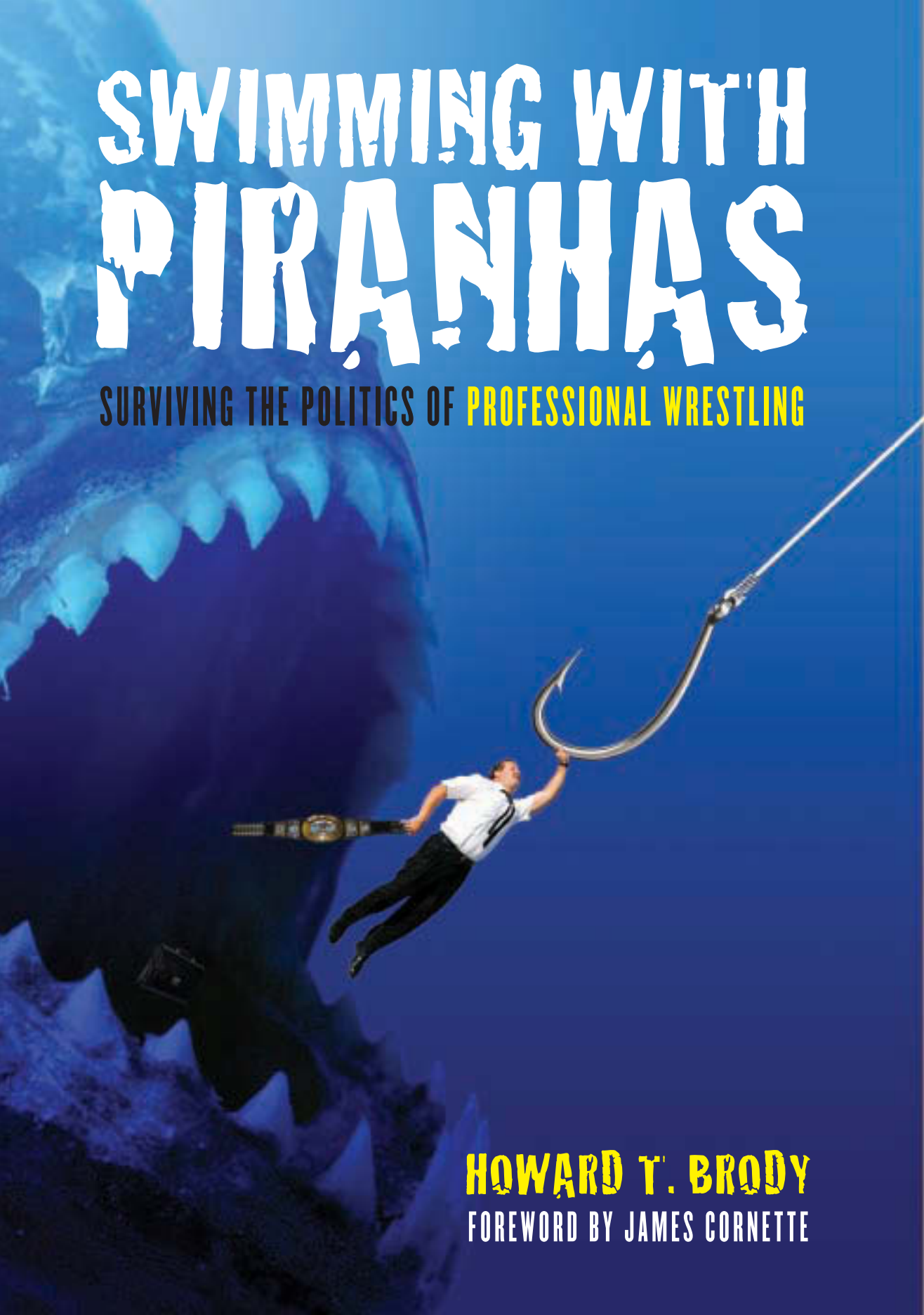
SWIMMING WITH PIRANHAS

SURVIVING THE POLITICS OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING



HOWARD T. BRODY

FOREWORD BY JAMES CORNETTE

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HOWARD T. BRODY

ECW PRESS

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It is often said we learn something new every day. With that I am dedicating this book to all the teachers who have been a part of my life, whether they were my educators, mentors, friends, lovers or family members. The life lessons you provided cannot be found in any textbook. Your examples cannot be shown in any addendum. Your return on investment cannot be measured by any bank account balance. To those of you who contributed to who I am, whether you are still physically with us or only participate in spirit, thank you for guiding me through this existence that is called life. And as I continue on my journey forward, may you always remind me not only what the difference is between right and left, but what the difference is between right and wrong.

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Foreword

BILL OTTEN

Perseverance? Persistence? Pugnacity? Or plumb nuts?

These are all words that can be used to describe, if not indict, Howard T. Brody's indomitable spirit throughout his long and often frustrating journey in professional wrestling. In the 15 years I have known him, he has shown the same enthusiasm, sometimes bordering on glee, for every deal he has pitched me or participated in with me, whether it be a six-figure overseas TV deal or an NWA event in Voorhees, New Jersey. Howard genuinely loves being involved in the business of wrestling. Now that I've read his very candid (and incredibly detailed) autobiography, if I'd known how many mishaps he'd had for each success, I'd have thought he was even crazier than the rest of us for wanting to be a part of this wacky industry.

Howard has dealt with most of the movers and shakers in the world of wrestling, from Vince McMahon to Antonio Inoki to Dennis Coralluzzo. He has flown around the globe several times over, syndicating wrestling television or promoting foreign

tours. He even appeared on *Raw* in his alter-ego of "NWA President Howard Brody of Tampa, Florida." Sometimes, as you will see from this book, he remembered to bring his clothes.

But for all his achievements, Howard isn't afraid to tell you about the misfires, and at some points you truly understand the old wrestlers' allusions to the business as a "drug," or "mistress," if it made someone put up with this level of frustration. Howard is probably the only promoter in history to lose a deal because of the fall of communism!

I have always loved the performing or creative sides of wrestling and mostly loathed the business side. Howard Brody has not only concentrated on the business side for 25 years, but carved out his own niche in it. He has persevered through many crises to establish himself in several facets of our sport — promoter, syndicator, talent agent — and done it with a smile (mostly). No matter what he says now, he will always have an eye open for a good deal in the wrestling business. Once you've been NWA president, the disease is incurable!

I loved this book and can't wait to read Howard's cousin Todd's book too!

Jim Cornette

Introduction

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Professional wrestling is my mistress. For more than 25 years I've been chasing after her like some out of reach dream. Every so often I catch her, and we have an affair. It usually lasts just a short period of time, and then I swear her off forever — but in the back of my mind, I wait patiently for my opportunity to be with her again.

But I'm not the only one who's been enticed by her.

To those of us who have been involved with her, she is an intoxicating lady with an inexplicable quality that makes us addicted to her. Unfortunately, the fix can sometimes be fatal. I suppose she is to us as a mermaid is to an old sea dog; she beckons us from afar, and if we get too close without the right frame of mind, it can cost us dearly.

I only call her a lady because as the late, great Hiro Matsuda once told me, if you treat her right, she will give you everything you could ever want. Mistreat her, and she will make your life miserable.

So what is it about this crazy business that we find attractive? Why are we drawn to an industry filled with carnivores — individuals who would backstab their own mothers for a dollar and sometimes not even that much? Why do we risk our real-life relationships with the ones we love in order to be a player in an industry predicated on a fantasy? What the heck is it about pro wrestling that, despite all the warnings, all the horror stories, all the ugliness, hypnotizes us into staying and trying to succeed when others have failed?

To paraphrase an old proverb, "the answer lies within."

By now you're probably asking yourself, "What makes *you*, Howard Brody, such an expert on pro wrestling?" Well, that's a great question.

Although I've never wrestled a match in my life, I'm proud to say I've been involved with almost every aspect of the business. I started as a fan, crossed the line as a wrestling magazine writer and photographer and then crossed the line again as a promoter. I've produced wrestling television and radio shows, traveled the world thanks to the business and have been involved with some of the most colorful and influential people in wrestling history.

Little did I know that when I attended my first card at Madison Square Garden at age 13 to see Pedro Morales wrestle Larry "The Axe" Henning, I would appear on World Wrestling Federation (WWF) television 25 years later before millions of people.

Little did I know that when I attended my first National Wrestling Alliance card at age 15, I would one day be president of the NWA and help save it from fading into oblivion.

Little did I know that when I wrote my first article for the *WWF Magazine* in 1985, I would help pen *Dusty: Reflections of an American Dream*, Dusty Rhodes's biography, 20 years later and then be tasked to write this book.

And little did I know that I would one day cross the line from wrestling observer to active participant and count Matsuda, Rhodes, Jim Cornette and the greatest announcer in wrestling history, the late Gordon Solie, among my close, personal friends.

Little did I know . . .

The phrase speaks volumes because, despite arguments to the contrary, not everyone in the wrestling business knows it all. Paul Heyman doesn't know it all. Eric Bischoff doesn't know it all. As much as I love him, Dusty doesn't know it all. Hell, even Vincent Kennedy McMahon himself doesn't know it all.

As for me . . . certainly not!

What I do know, however, and what I have learned from the wrestling business

and the people in it, I will share with you, giving you a unique look into this industry from a perspective much different than anything that has been written before.

To put everyone's mind at ease, this is not meant to be my autobiography — who, aside from my family, would want to read that? However, it will read like one because the vast majority of this book will include my life experiences, as these are the encounters and events that have shaped me into the person I am and have brought me to this point in time. It is these life events and the lessons I learned along the way that have enabled me to tell this story the way it needs to be told, mapping out an atlas that describes how to safely navigate the dark waters of pro wrestling politics. Simply put, I'm hoping others will learn from my mistakes — and there are plenty of them — in order to avoid the dangers that silently lurk, waiting for their victims.

I don't know who coined the phrase "swimming with sharks" as it pertains to lawyers, but lawyers have got nothing on those who inhabit the piranha-infested waters of pro wrestling. All it takes is one small cut and someone in the industry will eat you alive. If you're lucky enough to survive the first assault, there's always another waiting in the darkness to take a bigger bite out of your ass. Lucky for me, I've got a big ass. But those of us with big asses sometimes just make bigger targets.

So, secure your goggles, take a deep breath and when we hit the water, stay close behind. Because just when the water seems to be the calmest — *chomp!*

Follow me . . .

ONE

WHERE HAVE YOU WRESTLED?

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

With Johnny Ace (left) and Dory Funk Jr. (right) at an Alachua County Fair show in Gainesville

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.
— E.E. Cummings (1894–1962)

Sometime in late 1982 — I don't remember the exact month or date — I met the "Dean" of pro wrestling announcers, Gordon Solie, for the first time. It wasn't exactly a stellar meeting. At the time I was attending the University of Florida in Gainesville, and to me, like many fans of the old Championship Wrestling from Florida territory, Solie *was* wrestling.

I drove to the old Tampa Sportatorium at 106 North Albany Avenue seeking a

public relations job with the Florida office. I do remember that it was on a Wednesday morning because that's when they filmed for TV. After being escorted inside and invited to watch from behind the scenes, I waited for nearly three hours after filming was done before Gordon was able to see me. The meeting lasted only a few minutes, and after reviewing my then skeletal résumé, Gordon's advice was to stay in school then look him up when I graduated.

Not exactly what I wanted to hear. But I took his suggestion and reluctantly drove back to Gainesville.

It was an interesting day, to say the least. Perhaps the most interesting part, however, was when I first arrived at the office. At 10 a.m. I was met in the lobby by none other than former NWA World Heavyweight Champion Dory Funk Jr. He was the booker back then.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm here for a job," I said as I handed him my résumé.

He scanned the eight-and-a-half by eleven sheet of paper and then darted his eyes back toward me. "Where have you wrestled?" he asked, perplexed at not seeing any wrestling credentials anywhere on the paper.

Didn't he know? Why back in the summer of '77 I had made my pro debut at the tender age of 17 . . . well, sort of.

Hold everything! Didn't you say in the introduction, "I never wrestled a match in my life?"

That's true. But in pro wrestling people lie all the time. People pretend to be something or someone they are not. For decades those in the industry lived and died by the code of kayfabe, something that has since been broken into a million pieces.

Simply put, kayfabe is the act of acting. When a wrestler broke kayfabe, he was no longer pretending to be the character that he was in the wrestling world and was just being himself. Back in the day, the unwritten rule was that in order to prevent the business from being exposed for what it was, people in the industry never broke kayfabe when they were around people who weren't in it.

So was I a wrestler or wasn't I?

For as far back as I can remember, pro wrestling was a part of my life. Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, I remember watching guys like Karl Gotch, Rene Goulet, Gorilla Monsoon, Haystacks Calhoun and Crusher Verdu on our old black-and-white Zenith television. You had to get the rabbit ears just right to get channel 47 out of Newark, New Jersey. Many times my older brother Brian and I watched the show through a screen full of snow. It used to drive my dad out of his mind, and he used to ask, "How can you watch this phony crap?" Needless to say, he was not a fan.

In public school some of the kids who knew I was a wrestling fanatic called me "Chief" after my then favorite wrestler, Chief Jay Strongbow. I don't know if they really called me Chief because he was my favorite wrestler or because I had a nose as big as his. It didn't matter because I learned early on something that was important growing up in Brooklyn: if you had a reputation for being a tough kid and the perception was you could kick some serious ass, the real bad kids left you alone. That lesson would be essential to me later in life, too, because in the wrestling business, in order to help you navigate those piranha-infested waters, you have to be able to manage your reputation and the perception of who you are. Thinking back, I can't help but smile: I remember actually doing the Chief's war dance once during a real fight.

As a kid the perception of me was I just loved to fight. Look at me cross eyed, and the odds were I'd see you at three o'clock in the school yard. I wasn't a bully, just a scared kid protecting himself. I always knew how to pick my fights though. I really never liked confrontations, especially with the older kids who could easily put a hurt on me. But I did what I had to do to keep from getting the snot beat out of me on a regular basis. Maybe it was because I was usually the biggest kid in my class and an easy target. Maybe it was because I was a little crazy at the time. Maybe it was both. The fact of the matter was . . . I was trying to be something I wasn't.

At one point or another every tough kid in my grade tested me — except one, and that's because I don't think either of us wanted the reputation of being second fiddle to the other. We weren't friends, but we were friendly. He was the best athlete in school, and years later Louie Kerscher and I would play high school football together. The truth of the matter was, however, he could have kicked my ass . . . easily. As a fourth- or fifth-grader, getting the reputation as the kid you didn't want to mess with was a good thing because, as I said, it kept the real bad kids away.

The bad-boy reputation stayed with me, and during my first day of class at Cunningham Junior High I had to prove myself all over again. Those who knew me from PS 255 knew to stay away from me. However, there was now a whole slew of new kids to convince. I started seventh grade off on the wrong foot, beating up not one but two black kids. The incident made me instant friends with all the Italian hoodlums in the school, but it also prompted the first of many meetings between my parents and the school guidance counselors. While the fight was great for my rep among my peers, although I was hardly the toughest kid in school, it made those who really mattered, my teachers and the school administrators, perceive me negatively. Some thought I was on drugs. Some thought I had no respect for myself or anyone else. I didn't know it, but my tough-guy reputation was putting me on the wrong track.

It was during this time that I started making monthly treks with my brother Brian to Madison Square Garden to see my new wrestling hero, Bruno Sammartino. We were there in December 1973 to see him beat Stan "The Man" Stasiak for the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) championship — the noise from the crowd was deafening — and saw him defend the title against the likes of Nikolai Volkoff, Waldo Von Erich, Killer Kowalski, Don Leo Jonathan and perhaps my two favorite heels of all time, Spiros Arion and "The Golden Greek" John Tolos.

It was also during this time that I noticed the world champion never wrestled on television. His reputation for being the best meant that he didn't need to wrestle on TV; all he had to do was talk the talk. He was so good, if you really wanted to see him walk the walk, you had to buy a ticket to see him in the arena. Little did I realize back then it was a brilliant marketing ploy to sell more tickets. To me he was protecting his status, just like I was protecting mine. I got the notion that I could keep the rep by getting the other person to back down by talking a better game than him. It worked nearly every time.

That brawl in seventh grade and my rep as being a good fighter kept the tough guys away for the better part of two years, until one of the toughest kids in the school rattled my cage over something really stupid. It was during ninth grade, my last year of junior high and the year the kids started calling me "Eagle Beak" because of my big nose. I always considered myself pretty even tempered, and I got used to the name calling. But on this particular December afternoon in '74 I lost it. A classmate by the name of Orval Deputy drew a picture of a giant nose on the class blackboard and said it was my mother. It set me off. While it was pretty commonplace to see how bad one could denigrate another kid's mother, that little comment prompted me to pick up one of those old metal and wood school chairs and rifle it toward him. I just missed the teacher.

It should be noted that in March '76 Deputy would be one of the 12 finalists in New York's Golden Gloves with a record of three knockouts, two decisions and one bye. His 135-pound sub-novice opponents included Luis Resto, who later would become a popular New York City club fighter but was banned from boxing for life when he cheated during a Madison Square Garden match (his trainer removed the padding from his gloves in a fight against Billy Collins); Howard Davis Jr., the '76 U.S. Olympic gold medalist whose teammates included the Spinks brothers and Sugar Ray Leonard; and David (Davey) Moore, who would go on to become the World Boxing Association junior middleweight champion, fighting the likes of Roberto Duran and Wilfredo Benitez. Can you say six degrees of separation?

Before we could actually exchange punches, both Deputy's friends and mine

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The nearly undefeated Cunningham boys softball team (me in the back row, far right) in the spring of '75

kept us separated long enough for the teacher to run down the hall and bring back one of the school guidance counselors. It's a good thing, too, because if he and I would have gotten it on, that could have very well been the end of this book. The teacher went and got Mr. Scotto, and that was the end of the fight. It was never one of those "I'll see you after school" deals because I didn't want to fight him and I don't think he wanted to fight the crazy white kid. In the aftermath, he never called me "Eagle Beak" again, and I stayed as far away from him as I possibly could.

Anthony (Tony) Scotto was the one teacher in school nobody ever wanted to mess with, not even the other teachers. Just his name itself says, "Don't screw with me!" While his primary job was being the school's gym teacher, he also taught science. Later that school year he became a legitimate friend when I tried out for the school softball team. As a kid I was a big baseball fan with dreams of playing for the Yankees or Mets. After tryouts, instead of getting the starting catching job as I had hoped, I ended up as the team's statistician. I wasn't exactly basking in the thrill of victory, but it wasn't the agony of defeat either. Perhaps other kids would have been embarrassed to accept such a role, but I had to accept that I just wasn't as good

a player as I thought I was . . . And I loved baseball so much I didn't mind doing it because it gave me an opportunity to see a different part of the game I loved — not exactly baseball, but close enough. By letting me help set the batting lineups and defensive positioning, Scotto taught me how to think of something like baseball in a way I never had before. I also think Scotto recognized it as a way for me to be more social with the mainstream kids. I wasn't just this tough guy who could fight; I was the kid who helped the coach lead the team to a 17–1 season by tracking where every pitch was placed and where every ball was batted. I stayed in touch with Scotto well into the '90s.

For most kids, the chair throwing incident would have prompted instant suspension, but lucky for me the vice principal, Mr. Rosenthal, intervened and gave me two weeks' detention instead. Cliff Rosenthal and his wife, Fran, were friends with my oldest brother and sister and their respective spouses. In all likelihood that was my first brush with politics. It certainly wasn't my last. From an early age I learned it was all about who you know.

And who I knew would end up getting me the best seats I ever had for a pro wrestling show, too.

In the summer of '75, my mother and I went to San Diego to visit my sister Phyllis and my brother-in-law Jack, as my sister had given birth to her second child. Because of all the fanfare I got to meet a lot of Jack's family, including his stepbrother Gary, who turned out to be a huge wrestling fan. Gary was a bit older than me, but back then wrestling fans of different ages could actually carry on a conversation without having a puzzled look on their face when mentioning a wrestler's name. He was a regular of the local matches at the San Diego Sports Arena, and he asked me if I wanted to go to the next show. Back then, the territories ran the large markets weekly, and San Diego was one of their top cities. It was during the waning days of the old Hollywood Wrestling Office out of Los Angeles, which was owned by Mike LeBell. I had seen many of the local wrestlers on TV back in New York, so I pretty much knew who everyone was. This would be my first non-WWWF event and the first time I would attend a show that had the letters NWA associated with it.

While the details of that night more than 30 years ago are sketchy, a few things still stick out in my mind. Not only was it the first time I ever sat in the front row of a wrestling show, it was the first time I ever saw fans get involved in the action. Some of the wrestlers on the card to the best of my recollection included Cocoa Samoa, "Hurricane" Frank Hester, Louis Tillet and a tag team that drew unbelievable heat — provoking anger and gut reactions from the crowd — the Hollywood Blonds, Jerry Brown and Buddy Roberts, managed by Sir Oliver Humperdink.

I don't remember why the Blonds were at ringside early in the show, but there

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The four Brody brothers (from left to right, Arnold, me, Brian and Martin) in October 1983

were no guardrails around the ring, and an unlucky fan who was making his way back from the concession stand somehow ended up in Brown's face. The two began brawling, and the fan literally had the shirt ripped off his back. It was torn to shreds and looked as if it had been clawed by a lion or tiger. Amazingly enough, the fan was not ejected from the building, and at intermission he went ringside, held up his shirt and asked if anybody would like to buy it. The main event was a steel cage match with the Blonds. I don't remember who their opponents were, but after an empty liquor bottle flew into the ring and hit the referee in the head, Gary quickly led me out of the building before it got any uglier. We got out of there just before a riot started, during which the fans actually climbed the cage and tried to rip it down.

That's all it took. Wrestling was now permanently injected into my bloodstream and, unbeknownst to me, there would be no antibiotic or inoculation to ward off the long-term effect. It laid dormant in my system, festering.

By the time I got to James Madison High School, I had shed the tough guy image and was trying to be an athlete by playing football. Unfortunately, unlike my older brothers, I was just too damn slow and clumsy to make first team. Being the youngest of six children, I was pretty much the runt of the four Brody boys.

Although I left home every morning to go to school, I hardly attended. In hindsight, I was heading down a path that, if continued, probably would have seen me enter a world of drugs and who knows what else. After the first game of the season, I broke my wrist. I was hoping to make it into the final game and although I suited up for the first time in six weeks, I did not see one second of play as the Madison JV squad suffered its only loss of the year.

Then, shortly after football season was over, an incident took place that changed my life forever.

It was mid-November 1975, sometime before Thanksgiving, and I went to visit my brother Arnie and sister-in-law Judy. I was out in the backyard playing ball with the family dog when Cindy, a German shepherd mutt, crawled through a hole in the fence and ran into the woods. I took off after her. By the time I made it around the tall wooden fence, I wasn't sure what direction she had gone in, so I started calling out, and pretty soon I was all turned around. It started to rain hard. But it wasn't one of those summer thunderstorms . . . It was a bone-chilling winter rain almost like sleet. I continued my search for about an hour. I lost my bearings, but I managed to find my way back. When I returned to the house, I found that Cindy had already returned safely. I, on the other hand, started to feel a chill right through me and decided to get into bed early, not even hungry enough to eat dinner.

I ended up in bed for close to six weeks with double pneumonia, shedding nearly 60 pounds from my then five-foot-six-inch frame. I was down to 150 pounds, having gone days at a time without eating because I was unable to hold anything down. I was so out of it, I even missed Super Bowl X, when the Pittsburgh Steelers topped the Dallas Cowboys 21–17.

At the end of January, my oldest sister, Terri, who was 21 years my senior, and her husband, Lester, came to New York to attend a bar mitzvah for a family friend. Just after Thanksgiving they had moved to South Florida, where my brother-in-law had established a sales office for the company he worked for. Arnie and my dad worked for the same company too. The plan was for the whole family to eventually move to South Florida, as the company was winding down New York operations.

With me being on the slow road to recovery and the New York winter still in full force, Terri and Lester asked me if I'd be interested in moving to Florida with them to recuperate. Since I had almost a year's worth of truancy under my belt and had no desire to finish school in New York, I took them up on the offer, and within two weeks I was heading for the Sunshine State. As it got closer to the time for me to move, I got cold feet, but my parents assured me it would only be for a couple of months, as they were planning to head down in the spring. As it turned out, they wouldn't make the move to Florida until the fall of '77, nearly 18 months later.

For a 15-year-old, the transition from Brooklyn, New York, to Hollywood, Florida, was not an easy one. I found myself a frequent outsider at Hollywood Hills High School. Aside from the fact that most of the girls were drop-dead gorgeous with year-round tans and wore a lot of short skirts, there wasn't much else I liked about my new school. Some of the kids called me "Sweat" as in "Sweathog," just like the characters on the popular TV show *Welcome Back Kotter*, which was set in

Brooklyn. I had very few friends, if any, and I mostly kept to myself.

Although I was tempted to once again don the "tough guy" image, I really never had to as Hills was, unlike Madison, mostly comprised of upper middle class white students with very little diversity. The school had some rednecks and white trash too, but they pretty much stayed out of my world. Instead I tried out for the baseball and football teams, but I was declared ineligible to play because I wasn't living with my parents and, technically, my sister and brother-in-law weren't my legal guardians. So I simply blended in with the rest of the average white-bread students, and I stayed below the radar until the day I graduated.

But two things happened to me during that time, both of which would have a huge impact on my life and my involvement in professional wrestling. The first is I discovered I had a talent for writing, and the second is I began to follow the local wrestling scene.

Saturday mornings belonged to the gravelly voice of the one and only Gordon Solie as he introduced me to a whole crop of wrestlers I had only read about in magazines. The Funks, the Briscos, Harley Race, Bugsy McGraw, Killer Karl Kox and Dusty Rhodes were just a few of the big names around Florida at the time. Within driving distance of my sister's house were the Miami Beach Convention Center, the Fort Lauderdale War Memorial Auditorium and the Hollywood Sportatorium, all of which were regular stops for Championship Wrestling from Florida.

Something else happened to me during that time. For whatever reason . . . whatever prompted me . . . whatever incensed me . . . I did something that even today I am not very proud to admit. I once again slipped into fantasy mode and pretended to be something I was not.

In a letter I wrote to my best friend at the time, Patrick Romano, who was back in Brooklyn, I concocted a story that I had trained to become a professional wrestler. Why did I do it? Who knows. Thinking back, remembering what the catalyst was for me at 16 or 17 to spin such a crazy yarn, I come up empty. Nevertheless, it happened and without realizing it, I took a path that many wrestlers follow. As I said earlier, the whole wrestling industry is predicated on a fantasy . . . an elaborate lie to fool the masses.

After I sent the letter off, I began to feel guilty, so I decided I would tell Pat the truth when I visited New York for the summer. After all, by then he probably would have forgotten about my little white lie, and we'd have a good laugh over it. Boy was I wrong.

When the summer of '77 rolled around and I went back to Brooklyn, there were two things my old friends were talking about: the Son of Sam and how I had become a pro wrestler. It seems Pat had told the whole neighborhood. I was pretty

much screwed because if I told him the truth now, it would not only make me a liar but would make him look like a fool for having told everyone. So for the summer of '77 I lived the lie of being a professional wrestler.

Most of the time it wasn't as bad as it could have been because my friends and I didn't talk about it very much. Whenever the subject came up I would quickly change it. It was only when we would bump into others we knew that the lie would be perpetuated. The only one who caught on to me was Pat's dad, who always asked me when and where my next match would be. Pat always came to my aid and cut him off, reminding his dad I was on vacation.

But then it happened. I got called on the carpet one day by a crazy bastard by the name of David Sultan. I knew David from Cunningham and Madison. At Cunningham he was the softball team's first baseman and the second best player on the team. At Madison we played football together. He was first-string guard and the team's kicker. He was one of the first people I knew who cut his hair into a Mohawk strictly for intimidation purposes. He was about four inches taller than me and had me by about 30 pounds. He wasn't exactly the type of person I would pick a fight with. David was around the neighborhood and had heard about my new profession. He thought I was full of crap and came looking for me to prove his point.

Pat, his brother Carl and I were heading back to their house after a game of softball when we came face-to-face with David in front of the PS 206 school yard. I don't remember what the exact words were, but David wanted to test me right then and there. Carl said something to the effect that I should just kick his ass and shut him up, while Pat said he would hold my bat and glove. I tried talking my way out of it, but David would have none of that. This is not something I wanted to do because, straight up, I was afraid of him and knew he could and would beat the hell out of me. My lie was about to be exposed in grand fashion. Reluctantly I gave my bat and glove to Pat, and the second I did, David made his first move toward me, trying to catch me off guard. I don't know how I did it or where it came from, but in a split second I somehow sidestepped David and tossed him to the concrete, wrapping him up in a small package. It happened so fast he didn't know what hit him . . . and neither did I! I didn't let him go until I heard him say, "Let me up." Pat and Carl were laughing, and when he got up, David was red with embarrassment. Then I remember Carl getting into his face and saying, "See, I told you . . . you don't mess with a wrestler!" I was still scared and thought for sure David would come right back and kick my tail all over creation. Instead he was respectful and simply let me off the hook. He immediately took interest in my "profession."

Although he hung out with us for a few days following the incident, that was

pretty much the last we saw or heard of David that summer, as the exaggerated story of how I had twisted him into a pretzel quickly made its way around the neighborhood. For the most part, that was also the last time the subject of wrestling was broached. Nobody ever asked me about it again, and I didn't offer anything to perpetuate the lie. I let the flickering flame slowly burn out until there was not even a trace of smoke left.

I learned a valuable lesson that summer about never trying to present yourself as something you are not. Little did I know, however, that that lesson would not only prepare me for life, it would prepare me for pro wrestling. In this industry, many of the wrestlers begin to believe their own public relations and transform themselves into their alter egos — living their gimmicks — rather than being the people they really are.

It's a sad statement, but what I should have learned at age 17, many people twice and three times that age still haven't and never will get. Six years later I made a similar mistake that nearly cost me my marriage.

So when Dory Funk Jr. asked, "Where have you wrestled?" I thought back to that time a few years earlier when I lied to my friends in Brooklyn, and I remembered how bad it made me feel. My answer was easy: "Nowhere," I responded. "I'm not a wrestler."

Later on that day, right before that meeting with Gordon, I saw Dory again. This time, however, he was leaving the Sportatorium with David Von Erich, and he asked, "You sure you don't want to wrestle?"

"I'm sure."

While I pretended to be something I wasn't for much of my childhood right up to the time I was 17, I fortunately never took that path with people in the wrestling business. I've known many who have, and they're either no longer in it or dead. And so my friends, that is the best answer to the question "Where have you wrestled?"

Be honest about who you are and what you've done or not done, and you'll not only navigate the piranha-infested waters of pro wrestling, but you'll navigate life just fine. Pretend to be something you're not, and I guarantee that bite will sting you for years to come, long after the teeth marks have faded.

Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.

— Judy Garland (1922–1969)

TWO

POLITICAL SCIENCE 101

COURTESY DAISY WEI HAWKINS

*PWT*s iconic front man, Bill Apter

In politics, nothing is contemptible.
— Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881)

One thing you will have already noticed in this book is that each chapter starts and ends with a quote. Why? The first is my attempt to set the tone with foreshadowing. The closing words are an effort to wrap things up. I began using this technique in 1998, when I was president of the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and wrote a column called "Notes from the President" for their website. I wanted to show the readers, as I do now, that what happens in the surreal world of pro

wrestling is an extension of what happens in the world every day. I want to illustrate that the diversity and complexity of these worlds of fact and fiction often parallel each other. What is experienced by those of us in the wrestling business can invoke emotions in the reader and allow them to draw their own conclusions, giving them a better insight into why some of the people in the industry are drawn to it like the proverbial moth to a flame.

When Benjamin Disraeli, a well-known British conservative statesman and literary and social figure wrote that nothing in politics is contemptible because he believed it was routine in politics, the phrase professional wrestling was not even a part of the English language. But if Disraeli had experienced the wrestling business, there's no doubt in my mind he would have applied his quote to that industry without hesitation because contemptibility in pro wrestling is as commonplace as a side headlock.

While politics occur in everyday life, they run rampant in pro wrestling — always have and always will. From the booker who hires his friends and gives them a push to the guy who'll never be booked again for being touted as a troublemaker or locker room cancer for saying what's on his mind, politics, sad to say, are a fact of pro wrestling life.

I have seen it at work firsthand, from both sides of the bargaining table. But just like in the real world, these political alliances are not limited to in-ring performers or bookers. Believe it or not, they are just as prevalent within the fringe businesses of pro wrestling, such as publishing.

It would be easy to explain how I got the nod over Alex Marvez, an established pro wrestling and National Football League journalist, to help pen Dusty Rhodes's book for Sports Publishing, LLC, in 2005, but my journey to that accomplishment actually started some 25 years earlier, while I was still attending the University of Florida.

In early 1982, as part of my studies at the College of Journalism and Communications, where I majored in magazine editing and minored in creative writing for film and television, one of the courses that I took was Modern Public Relations. What was interesting about this class was that you had to choose an established company and create a new corporate image for it. While some of my classmates chose giants of corporate America like General Motors, Motorola and AT&T, I decided to take on a real challenge with the entire industry of professional wrestling, which at the time needed a fresh, new face.

That class would inspire what I thought were many innovative ideas I had for pro wrestling at the time, some of which have since come to pass and some that have even come and gone. I won't be so bold as to say that I invented these things,

but I will say that, to my knowledge, there was nothing like them at the time — although somewhere someone else was having similar flashes of brilliance. The only difference between us was that that other person was born into the wrestling industry, had the money to run a business and knew how to turn those ideas into reality — something that would eventually culminate in a thing called *WrestleMania*. As for me, I didn't have a clue.

Included in my blueprint for changing the image of pro wrestling were tournaments to create single, unified world champions in the heavyweight, tag team and junior divisions instead of separate champions for the World Wide Wrestling Federation, American Wrestling Association (AWA) and National Wrestling Alliance; the creation of a merchandise line that included baseball caps, T-shirts and pennants like they sold at baseball and football games; the creation of a television network called the Wrestling Channel that would broadcast matches from all the different territories around the U.S. in addition to shows that aired in Canada, Puerto Rico, Mexico, South America, Europe and Japan (I got the idea from Ted Turner's SuperStation, which had started just five years earlier and had recently launched something called CNN); the use of 976 and 900 telephone numbers, which was a fairly new technology at the time, to disseminate controlled news and information (I was a frequent caller to New York City's Sports Phone much to my father's dismay after receiving the bill each month); and the industry's first all-color slick magazine that looked more like *Sports Illustrated* or *Time* than *Pro Wrestling Illustrated (PWI)*. The only thing that even came close to my magazine concept — except it was mostly black and white — was the newest and slickest wrestling magazine of its time, the now defunct *Wrestling's Main Event*, published out of New York by Pumpkin Press (now known as Chelo Publishing).

Remember that when I came up with these concepts I was a 21-year-old know-it-all who actually knew very little about the world and even less about pro wrestling's inner circles and secret battles. I thought the industry was just one big, happy family. In any event, it was these ideas that had prompted my trip to Tampa to meet Gordon Solie for a job in the business.

Although I was disappointed that the meeting with Gordon had not produced what I had hoped it would, I was not discouraged and started focusing my energies in wrestling toward what I did best, write. In doing my research for the public relations course, I got the notion that my task would have been a hell of a lot easier if I had had a resource book, like an almanac or an encyclopedia, for wrestling at my disposal — after all, they had them for other sports and industries. But the only resource book I could find was one by Roberta Morgan published in 1979 by Dial Press titled *Main Event: The World of Professional Wrestling*. While it included pro-

files, some history and legit interviews, I was looking for something with substantially more meat.

With nothing like that on the market, I decided an encyclopedia of professional wrestling would be my first official venture into pro wrestling journalism. Talk about biting off more than you can chew! I began preliminary research by going through hundreds of *New York Times* articles from the 1800s that were available on microfiche through the university's library.

By the time I was knee-deep in notes, what I envisioned was an all-encompassing book that could be updated annually or every few years that would include pre-1900 information showing how the industry came into existence leading up to the 1904 battle between George Hackenschmidt and Tom Jenkins; a year-by-year account of all the major events and matches from 1900 forward, including how each of the major organizations was formed along the way; legitimate biographies of the industry's major stars, concentrating on the champions; a list of active wrestlers in each federation; addresses and phone numbers for each wrestling company; and annual attendance figures. In retrospect it would have been like taking the best elements of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*'s annual *Wrestling Almanac and Book of Facts*, Gary Will and Royal Duncan's *Wrestling Title Histories*, Tim Hornbaker's *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling*, Dave Meltzer's annual *Wrestling Observer* newsletter's "Year in Review" issues plus his *Tributes: Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Wrestlers* and *Tributes II: Remembering More of the World's Greatest Wrestlers* and rolling them all together into one resource. In essence, it would have been an accurate historical account of an industry watched by millions without being wrapped in revisionist propaganda. What true wrestling fan wouldn't have wanted a copy in their library?

With the outline in hand I began looking for a publisher.

Even though I was still in school, I had already written for national publications, having freelanced for both *Starlog* and *Comics Scene* magazines, so I thought nothing of calling Cheh Low of Pumpkin Press, the publisher of *Wrestling's Main Event*, to pitch my idea.

Not surprisingly, Low asked me to submit my proposal in writing, which I promptly did. About a week after having sent the treatment off to the Big Apple, I got a phone call from him saying that he thought the idea was good, but he wanted to run it by his new magazine editor, and he asked if it was okay to do so. I said, "Of course." Roberta Morgan had been the magazine's initial editor, which is how it was named after her book, but she was replaced after only a few issues by a veteran wrestling photojournalist named George Napolitano.

While I didn't know it at the time, next to *PWI*'s iconic front man Bill Apter,

Napolitano — who was a school teacher by trade — was the most prolific and well-respected photographer in the business. He was frequently paid by promoters to come into their territories and shoot for them so they could get magazine coverage. There were a few other guys around the business at the time, like Frank Amato, Mike Lano, Norm Keitzer and Scott Epstein, but really it was a two-dog show, with Apter and Napolitano each having their own little niche.

Not long after my initial conversation with Low, we had a follow-up discussion during which he told me his editor thought the encyclopedia would take too long to compile and that nobody would be interested in it. He said something to the effect of "Fans are only interested in what's happening in wrestling now" and didn't care about its past. While I couldn't have disagreed more, he had already made his decision. He said he liked my writing style, however, and asked if I would be interested in doing an article for the magazine. While I was disappointed, I agreed to take my first wrestling writing assignment, and he put me on the phone with George Napolitano.

George seemed nice enough, and the assignment was simple: go to Tampa on Tuesday night and interview Mike Graham at one of the shows. He gave me a couple of contact phone numbers, and so I approached the assignment like I would any story. I called the Florida office to find out where I needed to go, who I needed to see to get in, what time to be there — all the essentials — and as far as I knew everything was fine. The only thing I found odd was that it took me a few phone calls to finally speak to the right person and get the information I needed. It was as if nobody knew anything. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was being kayfabed.

Tuesday rolled around, and I made the jaunt to Tampa, but I hit a horrendous thunderstorm that slowed me down considerably. The downpour caused several streets near the building to flood, sending me on a wild ride through a maze in a neighborhood I was less than thrilled to be in. I eventually made it but arrived about 45 minutes late. The person I was to meet at the building — Charlie Lay, an old-time worker and referee from Mississippi — was nowhere to be found. After much convincing, I finally made my way past security and for the first time stepped into the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory, a building I would promote on my own almost 20 years later.

As I walked past the double glass doors of the Armory, I heard the opening bell, and it was almost a religious experience. Just beyond the sea of fans I could see one single light shining down from above and hitting the two competitors in the ring. All eyes, about 2,500 of them, were transfixed on the match between Brian Blair and Terry Allen. I had to stop to take it all in. For a true fan of the sport this was nirvana. It wasn't until the crowd roared to signify the end of the match that I was

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

Tampa's historical Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory

shaken from that mesmerized state.

I easily made my way to the back of the arena and concentrated on my mission. The building was configured much differently than when I ran shows there in 2001; back in the early '80s there was not only flat seating on the main floor but risers in the building as well, and whoever didn't fit on the floor sat on the second level, looking down. The dressing rooms were also on the second floor and situated away from the fans at the far end of the building. It was not uncommon to see wrestlers perched up there, watching the matches. After trying unsuccessfully to get several people to let Mike Graham know I was there to see him, I was finally able to get the attention of James J. Dillon. I introduced myself to J.J., and with the information on who I was and why I was there, he made his way back to the dressing rooms.

After about 10 minutes Mike Graham emerged, and I proceeded to interview him as I would anyone else. Some of the material was actually pretty boring, the same mundane stuff you'd read in any wrestling article of the time. But in the course of the interview he mentioned a recent trip to Japan and working against their top junior competitors. He also mentioned that Andre the Giant was on the tour with him, and that while some of the Japanese boys gave him a hard time, with Andre there they never messed with the guys "at the back of the bus," meaning the Americans. (He never explained to me why this was the case, but I suppose it was because since Mike's father was Eddie Graham — the owner of the Florida territory and one of the movers and shakers of the NWA — Andre watched out for him.) That was the hook I needed to write a compelling story. I not only wrote about Mike's success on the Florida circuit, but I went into detail about his trip to Japan and his travels with Andre and the other wrestlers on the bus. I was proud of that article because it wasn't the same type of hyperbole that everybody else seemed to be writing.

About a week later, after not hearing anything from the magazine, I placed a call to George.

I was all pumped up for the conversation because I knew he would just love the piece I had sent him. Instead I got a swift kick to the nether regions. George Napolitano, one of the most respected guys in the business and arguably the best wrestling photographer to ever focus a lens, told me my story didn't cut it. I will never forget what he said: "Nobody wants to read about the wrestlers traveling on a bus; they want to know who they're feuding with and if they won or not."

I thought this just couldn't be the case because not only did it go against everything I was taught in journalism school about finding a hook, as a wrestling fan myself, I found that what the wrestlers did away from the ring was just as fascinating as, and in some cases even more interesting than, who they feuded with or if they won or lost their match.

In hindsight, while I realize that George was trying to protect the business in his own way, he was also dead wrong. If what he had said was true, then a guy like Dave Meltzer would never have been able to revolutionize wrestling journalism a few years later with his newsletter. Although Dave wasn't the first to produce a newsletter that broke kayfabe — that honor goes to "Uncle" Burt Ray who published *Mat Mania* in the '70s and for whom Meltzer wrote — but you can say Dave was the first to unmask the business on a national stage. By writing about what went on behind the scenes, exposing not just the bad things but the good things too, and bringing that information to the general population — when in 1990 he wrote for the short-lived sports newspaper the *National Sports Daily* (and its editor-in-chief, Frank Deford, a prominent sports journalist) — he really opened the door for countless wrestling books, including this one. A lot of people credit Mick Foley for pushing the door open, and while he did great justice to the business by what he wrote and how he told his story, in my humble opinion it was actually Meltzer, and guys like Wade Keller, Steve Beverly and others, who created the awareness that eventually sparked the Internet revolution in the late '90s that today enables websites like 1wrestling.com and pwinsider.com to deliver behind-the-scenes events almost instantaneously. Some might argue that when A&E aired its pro wrestling documentary and the Andre the Giant biography they also drew attention to the fact that the masses were interested in this type of information.

In any event, George belittling my work wasn't the worst part of our conversation. He claimed that the powers that be in the Florida office had complained that I aggravated them not only at the show but with my preceding phone calls, and I was no longer welcome at their shows. It appeared as though not only was the business not ready to break kayfabe, but my wrestling journalism career was over before it really began. To the Florida office I was persona non grata.

Although it took a long time to get over that deep cut from George — a wound that would be reopened in late 1984 — I once again found myself disappointed but not discouraged. By late 1983 two new ideas had popped into my head; one sparked by a conversation with a local chamber of commerce office worker, and the other from a feature I saw on a television news, entertainment and informational program called *PM Magazine*. I no longer cared about being published in wrestling magazines, and instead I focused on two mega publications: *Playboy* and *Sports Illustrated*.

In March '83 my then fiancé and future wife, Sharon, and I moved from Gainesville back to the Fort Lauderdale area, and before long I found myself working in Pembroke Pines (a city adjacent to Hollywood and nestled between Miami and Fort Lauderdale) for a local throwaway newspaper called the *Pembroke Mirror*. Although it wasn't exactly the *Miami Herald* or *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel*, it was a writing job, and for the $196 per week plus $30 in gas reimbursement they paid, it might as well as have been the *Daily Planet*.

Before long I grew tired of the gig, as it was filled with a lot of city council meetings, visits to the police station to check the crime blotter and attending local chamber of commerce gatherings. It was also a lot to write each week, much more than I found I could produce. I don't know how I did it, but each week I produced at least two to three feature stories, six hard news items, a couple of photo essays and two editorials.

During this time there was also a bit of a debate as to where Joe Robbie, the beloved owner of the Miami Dolphins, would build his new stadium for his NFL franchise, as he wanted to move them out of the Orange Bowl. So, like every other person who had an opinion on the subject, in the August 21, 1983, Sunday edition of the *Pembroke Mirror*, I suggested a multipurpose sports complex be built in Pembroke Pines. I argued the location was ideal because it would be easily accessible to fans from Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

What I didn't know is that a lady by the name of Vickie Askew — who not only worked for the Pembroke Pines Chamber of Commerce but was the wife of the city's vice mayor, Harold Askew, and one of my regular news sources — sent a copy of my editorial to her son and daughter-in-law who owned the Cape Cod Coliseum in Massachusetts. She sent it with the hopes they might be interested in building a facility in South Florida. However, her son was not interested, as he was busy trying to run the company he had recently bought from his father.

I had no idea who her son was, so when she told me it was none other than Vincent Kennedy McMahon — the co-owner of Titan Sports, who would eventually

become the most powerful figure in pro wrestling as the chairman of World Wrestling Entertainment — well, you could've knocked me over with a feather. While many of the old-timers referred to him as Junior, Vickie Askew simply called her son Vince.

I was pretty excited to hear this and asked her a ton of questions. That's when I got the idea of doing a story about the wrestling business for *Playboy*. I was growing tired of the grind and lack of creativity of the newspaper job, and I was interested in writing for a more meaningful publication. Despite being a skin magazine, from a literary perspective, *Playboy* had a history of helping to bring authors into national prominence; Ian Fleming, Arthur C. Clarke and even Alex Haley conducted many *Playboy* interviews throughout the '60s, including its very first with jazz legend Miles Davis. In addition to the notoriety, they also paid a hefty price for both their interviews and feature stories. When you're normally bringing home less than $200 a week, a $2,000 payday for a freelance piece is a lot of dough!

Eager to see if my idea held water, I reached out to Reg Potterton, an editor at *Playboy* I had met a few years earlier. After bouncing the idea off him, Potterton told me that while he thought it was an interesting proposal, it was hard to break into *Playboy* as an established writer, let alone as a new one. He also said because the piece was unsolicited that anything submitted would be strictly on spec, meaning there wouldn't be any guarantee it would be taken once sent in. While the prospects did not look very good, he did tell me he would see what he could do after I had the piece written. It was only a twinkle of light but enough to energize me.

At my first opportunity, I stopped by the Pembroke Pines Chamber of Commerce and told Vickie that I'd like to speak with Vince about a story I wanted to write for *Playboy*. I explained the situation, and instead of making excuses why she couldn't make the introduction, she picked up the phone and called her son. Within minutes she told him about me — reminding him of the editorial I had written about the sports complex — and by the time she hung up the phone, she had handed me his private phone number. "He'll be expecting your call," she said.

Not wanting to appear overly anxious, I waited 24 hours and called the next day. To my surprise, Vince got right on the phone. After all the niceties were exchanged, I explained what I had in mind, and while he was very cordial, he asked one simple question that I couldn't answer: "When will this story be published?" When I explained I was writing the story on spec, he very nicely explained to me that his time wouldn't permit him to participate unless he knew for sure the story would be published. When I told him I could not guarantee that, he thanked me, wished me luck and ended the conversation. Even though he was as nice as could be about it, he blew me off. Although I'd like to think that he was genuine and

simply being a businessman who did not have time to dedicate to something that had little chance of seeing ink, the reality is he probably was just doing his mother a favor by taking my phone call. Either way, the end result would be the same. There would be no *Playboy* article in the cards for Howard T. Brody.

Once again I was disappointed but not discouraged. Besides, I soon had more pressing matters to worry about. About a month later I walked down the aisle for my first of two marriages, and I returned from my Mexico City honeymoon without a job — a decision of my own choice though. Some might say I was a fool for quitting my job without having another prospect lined up, but Sharon was one hundred percent supportive, as my paycheck had bounced while we were out of the country, and to us that was unacceptable.

During the first week of December '83, still unemployed, I decided to concentrate on my freelance writing and ended up with a three-month assignment working for the New York Yankees. I was a regular reader of the Yankees' magazine and saw an ad seeking a writer for a short-term assignment. Luckily some of the people in press relations remembered me from a few years earlier, when I had interviewed then Yankee general manager and former shortstop Gene "The Stick" Michael for my college newspaper. I was hired over the phone on a cold-call solicitation. Unfortunately, just around the time spring training was starting for the '84 season, my assignment was coming to an end. Although I applied for the full-time position I was temporarily filling, the Yankees, reluctant to hire me because I did not have daily newspaper experience, opted for someone else. I was once again looking for a job, and while I had applied for positions at the *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel*, *Miami Herald* and the now defunct *Hollywood Sun-Tattler*, I just couldn't seem to find a steady place to hang my hat.

Before long I caught on with another local paper, the *Jewish Journal*. Being Jewish and proud of it, I initially thought it would be a nice change of pace to work with those of my own creed, especially after hearing anti-Semitic remarks from my previous newspaper employer. But after a few days I decided the work environment was simply *too* Jewish for my liking. I found many of my coworkers narrow-minded and it bothered me to hear some of them tossing around politically incorrect Yiddish slang as though it held no weight. I couldn't understand how they, as Jews, could spew such venom, having been the victims of verbal lambasting themselves. My employment lasted about six weeks. When I finally quit, one of my wife's cousins teased me about working there in the first place and suggested that I try to find a job with the "Goyim Gazette" instead. (For those not familiar with the Yiddish term, *goyim* or *goy* refers to those who are not of the Jewish faith and in most cases is said disparagingly.)

Once again looking for steady work, wrestling somehow made its way back into the picture.

I watched an episode of *PM Magazine* that featured a piece on Hulk Hogan, who was wrestling for the AWA at the time, and I decided he would be a perfect candidate for a story since he had made a big splash a year earlier in *Rocky III*. I pitched the idea to *Sports Illustrated* and shortly thereafter received a letter from their editorial department stating they would be interested in the piece on spec.

I called Verne Gagne's office in Minneapolis and spoke to someone named Roy Nelson, who I would eventually become friends with after several interactions, and found out that the Hulkster was no longer working for Gagne but had taken a job with New York — "Oh no! Here we go again," I thought.

I initially tried circumventing the New York dilemma by reaching out to people like Napolitano and others, who I thought would have Hogan's number, but nobody was willing to cough it up.

With no other options, I reluctantly called Vince's office to try to arrange an interview with Hogan — who had just become their champion — and somehow I ended up on the phone with Lord Alfred Hayes. I knew of Hayes from the magazines of the day and tried to explain who I was and why I was calling, but he kept cutting me off, asking what I wanted and why I was bothering him.

While I didn't know it at the time, he was simply working me and doing his job, but he was ticking me off. Even though Vince had blown me off a few months earlier, I realized I had made a crucial mistake by not calling his private number as I previously had. When Hayes tried to scare me off by asking, "Where do you live?" implying that he would be sending someone over to pay me a visit, that was enough to get me to hang up the phone . . . and call Vince. Within 15 minutes of leaving a detailed message, I received a call from a person named Mark Sotichek in the Titan Sports Media Relations department. Sotichek apologized for Hayes's actions, claiming Lord Alfred was once dropped on his head by Hogan — which I knew was baloney but was amusing nevertheless — and he said he would see what he could do with my request.

Like clockwork, I received a call from Sotichek the next day, and not to my surprise the answer was the same as it had been a few months prior. If I didn't have a guaranteed publishing commitment, I would not be granted an interview. But during the conversation with Sotichek something amazing happened that would lead me to a job interview with Titan. For whatever reason, maybe it was my persistence, Sotichek revealed that the magazine's publisher and editor, Linda Kelly, was searching for someone to take over from her as the magazine's editor. He said something to the effect that if I was good enough to write for *Sports Illustrated*, even

on spec, perhaps I would qualify for the position. His only request was that I not mention I got the inside scoop from him.

So, armed with this information, I reached out to Linda Kelly.

Ms. Kelly was quite charming on the phone, and when she asked who had mentioned the open position, I explained that the person who tipped me off requested that I not reveal their identity. I guess it was some kind of kayfabe test because she appreciated that I did not disclose my source. Then, after grilling me on my background, she asked me for several writing samples, but not everything she asked for had been published. The WWF had a local show planned for that coming week at the Hollywood Sportatorium, and she wanted me to go down to the show and, based on what I saw, come up with two articles.

That was my "assignment." I was given no other direction, aside from sending them to her along with several published pieces for review when I was finished writing them. This was not a problem for me as Sharon, my then close friend Andy Sackheim and I already had our front row tickets for the big show.

When I got home after the matches, I sat down at my then state-of-the-art home computer — an Apple IIe with a single floppy disk drive that cost about $2,200 — and knocked out the two stories. First thing Monday morning I sent them out via overnight delivery along with some of my published pieces for review. Shortly before noon the next day I received a call from Linda Kelly.

Without any beating around the bush, she got right to the point and said she liked my work, especially the story I wrote about George "The Animal" Steele. The two stories I submitted were diametrically opposed in the way they were written and presented; I felt this was the only way to show my diversity.

The first story was titled "The Genius of George Steele," and I took the approach that perhaps the Animal's personality was simply an act — a diabolical guise to gain a psychological advantage over his opponents. I got the idea when Steele came out for his match, ran toward a group of fans gathered by one of the guardrails, yelled out his trademarked "Hey! You!" and then swirled that disgusting green tongue. Needless to say the group scattered like frightened cockroaches.

The second story was a straightforward biography piece on the latest tag team to join the growing WWF roster, Jack and Jerry Brisco. I simply mapped out their accomplishments as best I could with the hook that they posed the biggest challenge to date to the current WWF tag team champions, Adrian Adonis and Dick Murdoch.

After praising my writing abilities, Ms. Kelly asked if I could come to their offices in Greenwich, Connecticut, for a job interview on Thursday. Wow! This was my golden opportunity, but I had a little problem. I couldn't afford a plane

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

George Steele goes to work on the arm of Bret Hart

ticket since I was still unemployed. When I told her it would be a bit difficult for me to buy a ticket, she said they would take care of my travel and the ticket would be waiting for me at the airport. It was settled. In just two days I would be traveling to what I believed was wrestling's mecca for a job interview. It was at this point that she revealed Linda Kelly was her nom de plume. The whole time I had actually been interacting with Linda McMahon.

Thursday couldn't come soon enough, and before I knew it I was on a nonstop flight from Fort Lauderdale to New York, in a new suit and ready to take the first step in my new career.

When I arrived at LaGuardia Airport, I was met at the gate by a thin, frail-looking older man who carried a sign with my name on it. He looked more like a custodian than a limo driver, as he wore a weather-beaten blue and gold WWF baseball cap and had on a pair of blue jeans with one of those chains that went from his belt loop to a wallet in his back pocket. His face was long and aged, and he had a beard like Abraham Lincoln except it was white instead of black. His claim to fame, as I recall, was that he was the victim of a haircut by "Big" John Studd, Ken Patera and Bobby "The Brain" Heenan on the old *Tuesday Night Titans* TV show that WWF used to produce for the USA Network. I don't recall his name, but I heard years later that his "haircut" on TV was in retaliation for being caught with his hand in the merchandise cookie jar. What a way to be fired, huh?

Dishonest Abe drove me to Titan's offices in upscale Greenwich, but not in a

limousine. Instead, he drove me in what I was told was Linda McMahon's Buick. Aside from being nervous about the forthcoming interview, the ride was uneventful, except that the guy did not shut up for a minute. There I was, trying to gather my thoughts for the most important interview of my then young life, and this character wouldn't stop beating his gums. I tried my best to shut him out.

About 45 minutes later we pulled into their parking lot — they did not occupy the whole building back then — and a couple of things jumped right out at me. First, I remember seeing someone who I thought was Cyndi Lauper's boyfriend, David Wolff, leaving the building as I was arriving, and then I noticed two unique automobiles parked in the lot. One was this huge white monstrosity, while the other was a limo painted in camouflage. I learned the camouflaged car was used for the vignettes they shot with Sgt. Slaughter, while the other was Andre the Giant's "limo," although it looked more like a modified hearse or ambulance.

Titan Sports occupied the entire floor of the building, and high-gloss poster-sized photos of their talent, like Hogan, Andre, Adonis and Murdoch, Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka and "Rowdy" Roddy Piper, were on the walls. Unlike the rickety-looking offices I had seen in Tampa, this was a plush and professional-looking environment.

After giving my name to the receptionist, she instructed me to have a seat, saying Linda McMahon would be with me shortly. Sitting there patiently, I passed on the obligatory cup of coffee that was offered and ended up meeting and talking to both Mark Sotichek and the legendary wrestling promoter Jim Barnett, both of who just happened to pass by. While Sotichek wished me luck in the interview, Barnett said he hoped to see me again. A few minutes later and shortly before Linda came out to get me, I heard a song that sounded like it was from the late '50s or early '60s being sung by a recognizable voice. As the person made their way up the office corridor, the unfamiliar tune grew louder. Looking in the direction of that now unmistakable voice, I saw someone dressed in a mismatched suit of Kelly green slacks and a red blazer — it was none other than Vince McMahon.

For someone who must have been under tremendous pressure, Vince seemed fairly happy-go-lucky. He stopped at the receptionist's desk, dropped off and picked up some papers, made some small talk with his employee, looked in my direction and said, "Hello," to which I responded with a "Hello" of my own, and then he headed right back down the hall from which he had come, continuing with his whimsical vocals.

A few minutes later Linda came out and introduced herself. After the formalities, she led me to her office. I remember when I walked in that I thought the office itself was nothing special. It could've been anybody's office in any company. I don't

know what I was expecting, but it wasn't that. Nevertheless, you could tell it was an office that belonged to someone who had worked very hard to get where they were. The one thing that still sticks out in my mind was that there was a white-board sitting on an easel. One side had a list of wrestlers who were coming in to the company, and on the other side was a list of those who were leaving. On the "in" side I remember Junkyard Dog and the Fabulous Freebirds.

As we sat down, she gave me the skinny on the company and how they had got to where they were — selling the Cape Cod Coliseum, buying the company from her father-in-law and his partners, changing the wrestling organization name from the World Wide Wrestling Federation to the World Wrestling Federation, etc. When the conversation made its way back to the reason I was there, she reiterated how much she liked my work and then surprised me by telling me she remembered the editorial I had written about the stadium in South Florida.

Without beating around the bush, Linda came right out and made me an offer of $15,000 a year plus the cost of moving my wife and me to Connecticut. I knew it was not a lot of money to start, especially for that part of the country, but I also knew it would be a foot in the door that could materialize into something much bigger. I figured with Sharon working too we could easily make it work. When I told her I would be willing to start for that amount, she told me what my responsibilities would be and what would be expected of me over the coming months. The way she was talking, the job was mine.

She then gave me a quick lesson in both Titan Sports and "Wrestling 101." She explained that Vince ran the wrestling side while she ran the business side. She also explained that those who worked for them were like family and those who were loyal were rewarded. She then explained that pro wrestling was not choreographed, as people think, but rather is predetermined, or, in simpler terms, they know in advance who will win and lose — *ah ha, I knew it!* She then told me I could expect to hear the phrases babyfaces and heels, which were wrestling lingo for good guys and bad guys; it was the first time I had ever heard those terms. I was soaking things up like a sponge.

Linda then took me around the office to meet some of the people I would be working with. One of the things I recall was that she showed me a cold storage room that I think she referred to as "the vault." In it, she explained, they kept their footage of past shows. Last but not least, Linda showed me on a map some of the towns in the vicinity where I should consider living, since rents in Greenwich itself were a bit too high for what my salary would be. In all, she spent about an hour interviewing me.

There was one final step in the interview process, and I was home free. Linda

wanted me to meet someone named Robert DeBord. Although he was considered the magazine's associate publisher, I believe Robert J. DeBord was actually its distribution director and, to the best of my knowledge, was also the head of Titan's marketing department at the time. Like many at Titan who wore a multitude of hats, DeBord also had an on-air role of sorts, as he had been the host of an interview segment titled "Victory Corner" on one of their television shows. His on-air claim to fame, however, was that he had introduced Roddy Piper for the very first installment of "Piper's Pit," which of course became a mainstay of the WWF's *Championship Wrestling* TV show in the '80s. Fortunately for the fans of the WWF, DeBord's on-air persona did not last; he was about as charismatic as drying paint.

So there I sat in DeBord's office, and for 30 minutes he didn't say a word to me. I asked him if there was anything he'd like to know about me or my background, and his response was "Nope." I couldn't understand why he wasn't asking me questions about my experience or abilities; I would be working with the man in the near future. Since I had never met him before, he didn't know a thing about me except what was on my résumé and I found it odd that he didn't give me any type of acknowledgment. Trying to break the silence, I asked him simple questions about the magazine's circulation, its paper stock and some other things I had learned about in school. Half the questions he couldn't answer, and what he did answer was vague at best. I thought maybe he was just a yes-man, going along with whatever Linda said. Whatever the reason, giving me the cold shoulder was simply not cool (no pun intended).

Before I knew it, the time had come for me to leave and get back to the airport for my flight home. I said my goodbyes, and as Dishonest Abe drove me back to LaGuardia, I left Greenwich with a truckload of confidence that I would soon be working for Titan Sports.

To top off a very fulfilling day, I was driven back to the airport not in Linda's Buick, but in Andre the Giant's limousine. This time it was I who was the talkative one, asking the driver about the different areas to live in, what the traffic flow was like to Greenwich and questions of that nature. When he dropped me off, he said something to the effect that he would see me soon and wished me a safe flight.

The plane ride home seemed to take forever, and when I finally arrived in Fort Lauderdale, Sharon and I went out for a late celebratory dinner.

Then the waiting began.

A few days passed, and I was expecting a call from Linda at any time, telling me when I would be expected in Connecticut. I was working for my brother Arnie's company to pick up some extra money, as some of the bills were piling up, when I got a call from Sharon. She told me Linda McMahon had called looking for me.

I asked my brother if I could use the phone in his private office, and with Titan's number now memorized, I placed the call, anxious to find out when I would start.

Linda got on the phone and told me that she had enjoyed meeting with me and thought I would make a great addition to their team. She then dropped the bomb that they had decided to go with someone a bit older and more experienced than me. Linda was up front and said a person named Ed Ricciuti would be getting the position, and as an established writer with several books and hundreds of magazine articles to his credit, there was no way they could pass up on the opportunity to have him as part of their company. Although the words she was using sounded different, what I heard was that there was no way I could compete against his experience. While that might have been true — and a quick visit to edwardricciuti .com or a simple Google search on the Internet will confirm that even today Ed remains a prolific writer — I felt in my heart that, regardless of his experience, there was no way he could ever have the same passion I had for wrestling.

What was a bit strange about the conversation, as I recall, was that Linda said she still wanted me to write for their magazine because she felt I had a fresh approach. I was devastated because I wanted that job so badly, but under the watchful eye of someone who got the job I coveted, for a short period of time I wrote articles for *WWF Magazine*.

Years later, after Ed left the WWF and while I was working with Hiro Matsuda on a project called Ring Warriors, we had a discussion about starting a Ring Warriors magazine. During our conversation I learned that it was Ed's friend Robert DeBord who had helped him get the editorial position at Titan. It took almost 15 years to learn why I got snubbed in DeBord's office that afternoon in Connecticut. It really had nothing to do with me. It was the first time I was the unsuspecting victim of wrestling's office politics.

I held a grudge for many years, but in reading Ed's résumé — what he's written and accomplished over the years — there really was no way for me to compete. Linda McMahon made the right choice. Even so, I've often wondered what would have happened if DeBord would have given me a fair shake. While it will always sting that a different kind of wrestling politics played a role in keeping me from working for Titan Sports, I suppose Linda felt my passion and love for wrestling was simply not enough to accomplish what she felt they needed to do as a company.

Sure I was disappointed, but at least this time the door was left open for me to have some involvement in the business, albeit on a very small scale. If I wanted to continue pursuing something in wrestling, I could not let disappointment turn

into complete discouragement no matter what happened. And I was about to be tested again: later that year I received another blow to my already black-and-blue ego.

While walking through the aisles at Waldenbooks I was enraged to see *The Pictorial History of Wrestling: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* by Bert Randolph Sugar and George Napolitano.

Holy crap, that son of a bitch stole my idea!

George Napolitano, a so-called respected wrestling journalist, had stabbed me in the back. What kind of person shoots a writer down and then turns around and hooks up with a boxing historian — who doesn't know jack about wrestling — to steal his idea? It was a very poor version of my idea — but it was still my idea.

Not only had I been undermined at Titan, but now this. And to make matters worse, I had no legal recourse since the copyright was held by Sugar even though the text had George's style and signature all over it.

I hated Napolitano for a very long time. But just as I realized the anger over not getting the Titan job was a waste of positive energy, while I will never forget what George did, I have long since forgiven him. As it turned out, I would actually find myself doing business with George about 15 years later, while I was president of the NWA.

In retrospect, the personal conflicts and disappointments were just starting for me. However without those setbacks, who would I be today and what would I have learned about this crazy business and, more importantly, life?

Some of these lessons, although cliché, were all too clear: follow your gut, don't count your chickens before they hatch, only share your ideas with those you absolutely trust unless you have legally protected yourself. Other mistakes would be repeated over the years before the lessons were learned.

Follow these models, and hopefully the piranhas won't get you. Ignore them and I guarantee that others will fill their bellies with a nice chunk of your hide.

A pessimist is one who makes difficulties of his opportunities, and an optimist is one who makes opportunities of his difficulties.

— Harry S. Truman (1884–1972)

THREE

THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR EXPERIENCE

COURTESY GREG PRICE

"Nature Boy" Ric Flair was a lot more cordial at the 2008 NWA Legends Convention than when we first crossed paths

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is bitterest.

— Confucius (551 BC–479 BC)

When it comes to teaching, the adage "There's no substitute for experience" just might be the most overstated cliché. But there's a darn good reason. It's true!

As infants and toddlers we learn that we must crawl before we can walk and walk before we can run. We learn that the older we get, the less effective crying becomes, and so we begin to use the word "please." And somewhere along the way

we learn that if we play with the light socket long enough we'll get zapped.

But I often wonder why, as adults, do we forget these simple lessons? Why is it that those of us who participate in the wrestling business think we can circumvent convention? Why do we think we are impervious to consequences? Why do we think we will not get burned when we play with fire?

A former boss of mine, and now good friend, by the name of Jerry Blow once described my penchant for learning this way: "It's like you walk into an office, see a box of hand grenades and pick up one in each hand. But instead of putting them down and walking away, you pull the pins out with your teeth and wait for someone to throw you another." Jerry was lecturing me about how I needed to be less confrontational in the workplace, and his observation was spot-on. On *Star Trek* they described going in to a situation with both guns blazing as "cowboy diplomacy." I suppose as a West Point graduate who was trained to understand the human condition, Jerry knew better than most how to interpret my character traits.

Continuing in the wrestling business, I blindly went where others had gone before, except I had a grenade in each hand and two pins in my mouth.

Still reeling from not getting the job at Titan Sports and George Napolitano publishing a poor man's version of the book I had envisioned, I began submitting story ideas to Ed Ricciuti for *WWF Magazine*. However, it seemed that every idea I submitted was either already in the works or not what they had in mind.

Several months passed, and for every enthusiastic submission I made, I received an equally daunting rejection. But then something happened that truly lit a fire under my butt.

Shortly after the inaugural *WrestleMania* on April 1, 1985, I received my copy of the April 29th edition of *Sports Illustrated*. There, emblazoned on the cover of the Holy Grail for sports writers, and much to my dismay, were the words "Mat Mania!" along with the subtitle "Pro Wrestling's Top Banana" and a close-up photo of Hulk Hogan wearing his signature "Hulkster" headband.

My stomach was in my throat.

It's one thing to get beaten out of a job by a more experienced writer or even to have a book idea ripped off, but to see the basis of a story I had pitched and sold a year earlier to a magazine that could make or break my writing career appear on its cover, well, that made me nuts. I was more determined than ever to be published by the WWF.

Deciding to forego the traditional pitch route and with no direction from the office whatsoever, I knocked out a story in a few hours. Without hesitation or doubt and determined to get published, I sent the piece off to Connecticut the next morning. At one point I had thought about circumventing the process and sending

the story to Linda McMahon, but I chose to trust my ability and deal with the person who was hired instead of me. A couple of days later I got a call from Ed telling me the story would be in the next issue of the magazine.

Although it was hardly *SI*, I had finally broken through with a story that would appear on page 15 of the August/September 1985 issue of *WWF Magazine* titled "Island Boys: One Bad Pineapple Doesn't Spoil the Bunch." The article was a feature on Jimmy Snuka, Ricky Steamboat and Don Muraco, delving into their tropical island heritage. Although I had already been published nationally, for some reason this was my proudest publishing moment, as even Vince McMahon himself spoke about the story on an episode of *Tuesday Night Titans*.

From that point forward, every time I got a story idea I would just write it up and send it off for review.

Almost immediately after getting the call from Ed that my Island Boys piece would run, I began working on a story about the managers in the WWF at the time: Lou Albano, Freddie Blassie, Bobby Heenan and Jimmy Hart. Low and behold, my second feature, "How Do They Do It? Somehow They Manage . . ." would appear on page four of the October/November 1985 issue.

Two home runs with two swings of the bat; I was now on a roll.

But before I could pull a Reggie Jackson and go yard a third time, the proverbial bat was pulled out of my hands. I submitted three stories simultaneously, one for each of the next three issues. The magazine worked a few months in advance, so it was not a stretch to write so far ahead. Besides, I kept the topics general enough that with a few tweaks the stories could easily be repositioned.

But almost immediately upon submission, Ed dropped the bomb that I would not be able to write for them any further. He told me the company had decided to no longer work with freelance writers. I was told that unless I was an employee of Titan Sports my work would not be published in their magazine.

This did not sit well with me, and I didn't know if he was telling me the truth or not. I thought perhaps it was his way of telling me he didn't like what I had written or maybe I was being too pushy by submitting three items at once. What if he felt his job were being threatened by me? Or just maybe I crossed the line and hit a little too close to home with one of my stories?

Getting an idea from the April 1, 1985, edition of *SI* — in which renowned *Paper Lion* author George Plimpton wrote about Hayden "Sidd" (short for Siddhartha) Finch, a rookie pitcher who was training with the New York Mets and wore only one shoe, but could throw a 168-mile-per-hour fastball — I submitted an April Fool's Day story for the *WWF Magazine*.

The piece introduced a formidable new tag team on the scene — literal giants

of the squared circle. Abraham "The Axe" Brachman and Lester "Mr. Polyester" Goldstein were two renegade Jewish rabbinical students from Miami Beach known in tandem as the Ravishing Rabbis. The idea was to pose Andre the Giant and "Big" John Studd in traditional Hasidic garb, except they would also be wearing *lucha* type masks adorned with the Star of David. Oy!

The idea never came to fruition, and it would be 13 years before my name would once again grace the pages of a WWF magazine.

What to do? I couldn't write for the WWF, I was still on the outs with George and the *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* family of magazines wouldn't publish me. Where does a fan who desperately wants to be in the wrestling business turn?

The answer hit me like a ton of bricks: radio!

Back in college I had created and hosted a 60-minute pretaped science fiction, fantasy and horror show called *Night Chronicles*. The show aired on WGGG AM 1230 in Gainesville, Florida, from 11 p.m. to midnight on Saturdays and was a lead-in to the local midnight movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. We even had a sponsor called The Time Machine, which was a local comic book store that had begun selling these new products called graphic novels.

The show included a news segment from Natasha, the resident vixen vampire as portrayed by my then wife-to-be Sharon, who did her best Bela Lugosi imitation, which was actually pretty bad; music that suited the show, like the Eagle's "Hotel California," Michael Jackson's "Thriller," and John Williams's theme from *Star Wars*; and a 30-minute interview segment with such notable guests as Charles Clarence "C.C." Beck (the cartoonist who first drew Captain Marvel), Carol Serling (widow of the late Rod Serling and publisher of *The Twilight Zone* magazine), Adam West (best known then as TV's Batman), Vincent Price (renowned actor who appeared in many thrillers and horror films) and Isaac Asimov (one of the most prolific writers of all time).

With the idea of doing a wrestling radio show, I began the arduous task of pulling information together and identifying my options. I contacted my friend Joe Loverro, the program director who had green-lighted *Night Chronicles* at WGGG and was now running a country radio station in Burlington, Vermont, who explained that doing a 30-minute pro wrestling radio show would be difficult. He doubted any station would pay for a 30-minute weekly pre-produced show on the topic, and if they did, what they could afford would barely cover the cost of the tape, let alone cover expenses and turn a profit. He also educated me that while delivering the show via a satellite feed might be cost-effective, the 30-minute format would still be a hindrance. We discussed formatting the show as a one- or two-hour block that would include news, interviews and listener call-ins. Doing

the show that way, however, would create a whole set of different logistical challenges, including station clearance. I finally settled on a daily-strip format. This would allow a morning or midday host to simply drop in a two-minute Monday through Friday spot into their show, and it wouldn't matter what the station's format was. The show was configured to fit in with talk, rock, sports or country.

Content was important too, and we decided that to really make the show attractive, we needed sound bites from the wrestlers themselves. I contacted all the major wrestling offices, and nearly every promotion contractually agreed to allow me to lift sound bites from their television shows. Interestingly enough, a clause that Jim Crockett Promotions (JCP) insisted on was that their sound bites could not be used in any program that featured a WWF wrestler. The point became moot because of all the offices — Crockett in North Carolina, Verne Gagne in Minnesota, Bill Watts in Oklahoma, Fritz Von Erich in Texas and even Mario Savoldi in New Jersey — only the WWF would have no part of the show, opting instead to pursue their own WWF radio project. Just like in the magazines of the time, if we were to feature any WWF information on the show, it would have to be strictly news.

Now that the format was settled and most of the content was in place, I had a bigger problem. While my voice and delivery might have been good for a market like Gainesville, for national radio I, unfortunately, had a sound best suited for writing newspaper stories. So I convinced Joe to be my partner and work for a percentage of the income by dusting off his old Joe McKay radio persona and being the voice of *Squared Circle*, radio's number-one pro wrestling source! With that set, it was now time for the real work to begin.

In just a few weeks I had come up with an action plan. Unfortunately I was still working at a gas station and did not have a great deal of money to play with; I was just making enough to pay the bills. So I did what every red-blooded American entrepreneur does — I put everything on credit cards. And what I couldn't charge I took out in cash advances. Not very prudent but I didn't care. I was going to carve out a niche for myself in wrestling and was willing to put myself on the line to make it happen.

While Joe was voicing some raw tape in Vermont for me, I came across Frank Loconto, a former member of the popular '50s singing group the Lane Brothers, who not only owned a sound studio in Fort Lauderdale but was willing to help me get the project off the ground. Frank cut a deal with me to create the show's music bed, mix the sound and mass produce the demo tapes for a mere $2,500. Not bad considering I would need about 1,000 tapes. He also said he would include a second show in the price because, as he put it, the cassette tape had two sides and I should consider producing an alternative for the stations who wanted something

aside from wrestling. Frank was smart, and I took his advice. I would later hire him to score the original music for my Wild Women of Wrestling project.

Needing a second show to accompany *Squared Circle*, Joe said I should do a show on what I knew best and suggested a shortened version of *Night Chronicles*. While that was a great idea, I still had the problem of nobody to voice it. Joe couldn't be the voice of both shows, I certainly wasn't going to do it and while the thought crossed my mind for Sharon to reprise her Natasha character, I thought it would be too hokey and decided against it. I was stuck. Then I remembered one of the guests I had on the original show who would be perfect.

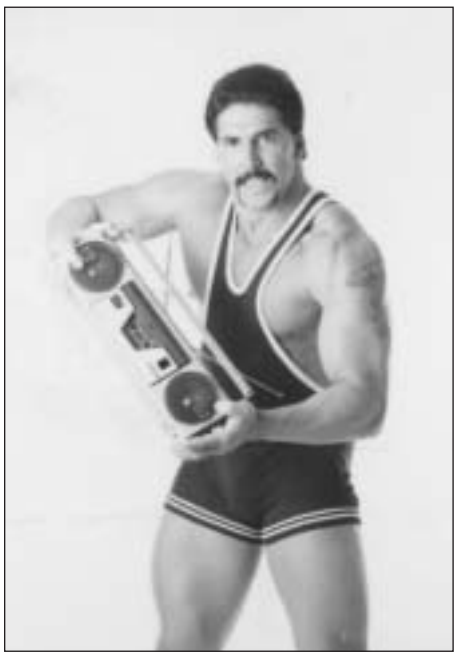
John Zacherle was somewhat of a cult figure in the Northeastern U.S., with a long career hosting horror movies on television in New York and Philadelphia as the characters "Roland" and "Zacherley" during the '50s and '60s, and during the '60s and '70s he had been a New York radio staple at WNES AM and later at WPLJ FM. His résumé also included voice-over work for movies and recording the top 10 novelty rock song "Dinner With Drac" in 1958. I called Zach and explained the concept, and he was onboard. Within a few days I had a couple of scripts out to him, which he voiced at a New York studio. Before long he sent his raw audio tape back to me for postproduction.

Before the cassettes could physically be produced, however, artwork was needed for both the tapes and the accompanying sales materials. *Night Chronicles* was easy, as we used one of Zach's ghoulish publicity shots. *Squared Circle* was a little more challenging. I wanted a photo of a big, brutish guy ready to smash a radio with his bare hands to fit in with the show's marketing campaign, "Something new is about to hit radio!" But who could I get? I didn't know any wrestlers yet.

I don't recall how I was put in touch with him, but the model I ended up using was a menacing six-foot, 275-pound Miami-Dade cop who was a former Mr. Florida bodybuilding champion with a second-degree black belt in karate and a tattoo of the Incredible Hulk on his left shoulder.

After choosing a local photography studio, Gil Fernandez Jr. showed up for the photo shoot and delivered exactly what I needed to get my vision across to radio program directors. At one point during the shoot he nearly crushed the radio with his bare hands — the photographer and I both chuckled as we heard the radio's casing start to give. Of the 12 shots that were taken, we chose the perfect photo, and his job was complete. I gave him his pay and never saw him again, although I did hear about him a few years later.

In 1990 his name was sprawled all over South Florida headlines. Fernandez was charged with the 1983 killing of three local drug dealers, and the highly publicized murder trial concluded in September '91 when he was convicted of the triple



FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Gil Fernandez Jr. a Miami-Dade police officer, poses for a brochure promoting *Squared Circle*

homicide. Today, he's serving three consecutive life sentences. Unfortunately, this would not be my only contact with someone who would become a convicted killer . . .

With the brochures in place and the demo cassettes on their way, it was time to shift things into high gear. The first step, in early February '86, was to send out press releases and place advertisements in the major industry publications, *Billboard* and *Radio & Records*, so program directors would get wind of the two new shows. At the same time I sent out personalized letters to the advertising directors of the top 100 advertising agencies in the U.S. and 200 national corporations.

Around the time those personalized letters were being delivered, our ads and press releases were being published. Almost immediately I had a bulk mailing company in Miami send out nearly 4,000 brochures to virtually every English-language radio station in the U.S. Within a week we were getting letters and phone calls from all sorts of stations requesting demo tapes, but when it came to potential advertisers, we were getting zero positive response. Of the answers we did get, it was mostly "Thanks but no thanks." The demanding task of follow-up phone calls to the advertisers would soon be taking place.

As for clearing the shows, a dozen stations signed up for one or both of them, including stations in Los Angeles, Dallas, San Antonio, Tampa, New Orleans and Boston. All of the stations that took the show understood that until we had a sponsor on board the show would not air. They did not seem to mind. One of the respondents, however, a station in Bangor, Maine, did not want either show but had something else in mind.

A person by the name of Mark Wellman contacted me from AM 620 WZON about a program they owned and wanted syndicated. It seems one of the owners of the station had put together a series of 13 five-minute vignettes called *Lists That Matter* and included such topics as the "Ten Most Horrible Foods," "Ten Best

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The promotional photo for Stephen King's *Lists That Matter*

Movies of All Time," "Ten Worst Films of All Time" and so forth. While the idea of taking on another show to syndicate did not necessarily appeal to me, the fact of who the owner was and that he wrote and voiced the segments himself did — the author of such novels as *Carrie*, *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining* among others: the master of horror himself, Stephen King.

Within a week of our first conversation, Wellman was on a plane to meet me face-to-face in Fort Lauderdale and to check out my operation. After seeing that my enthusiasm surpassed my experience, Stephen King's Zone Corporation still took a chance on a very untested commodity. By the first of April we had our agreement drafted, and after it was given the green light by the attorneys for both parties, it was made official on April 9, 1986. Having a powerhouse like King in my corner I thought, "How could I fail?"

It was around this time that I sought some solid business advice, and although I had brothers and sisters who ran their own businesses, I felt I needed someone a little disconnected from me to give me straightforward feedback and advice. I would find my mentor in my wife Sharon's cousin David Matluck.

Dave, who was only a few years older than me, ran a couple of successful businesses, including a huge plant and flower shop in Portland, Maine, called the Magic Garden, even though he lived in Fort Lauderdale. Dave always took an interest in what I was doing, whether it was writing for the local throwaway newspaper or my latest radio venture. The notion of me working with Stephen King intrigued him, although he warned me that I should not lose sight of why I started this radio syndication venture in the first place.

Almost immediately after signing the contract with the Zone Corporation, press releases went out announcing the King radio project, and before we could even put our demo tapes together, we had our first station signed up for the show, sound unheard. WBCN in Boston, a station that also wanted *Squared Circle* and

Night Chronicles wanted *Stephen King's Lists That Matter*. By chance we also took advantage of some great publicity opportunities. King, who had already been scheduled to appear on CNN's *Larry King Live*, not only plugged *Lists That Matter* there, but he also mentioned it on Larry King's radio show, which was heard on about 200 stations coast-to-coast through the Mutual Broadcasting Network.

In trying to get the three radio shows cleared and sponsors lined up, my days became long. I was working full time as a gas station attendant for a longtime family friend and getting up every day at 5 a.m. in order to open the pumps by six. When I was finished there, I'd hightail it home to be making calls by 3:30. This usually lasted until 8 p.m., as I worked my way across the time zones, calling stations and sponsors.

In no time the phone bills hit astronomical numbers, and I was setting myself up for a major financial disaster. With no money in the bank and maxed-out credit cards, Dave stepped forward and lent me $2,500 so I could continue trying to syndicate the King show. Unfortunately, I grossly miscalculated what it would take to get the stations necessary to secure a national sponsor, and in the process I not only failed miserably with *Lists That Matter*, I killed the chances for my other two shows to succeed because I had put all of my efforts into King's program.

In one fell swoop I was out of the radio business nearly as quickly as I had got into it, and I was now faced with about $20,000 of debt. My ego, not to mention my wallet, had taken a tremendous beating, and the stress was starting to get to me. Considering I was only making about $15,000 a year and Sharon made about $10,000, to us the debt might as well have been $100 million. While another woman might have run, not walked away, to her credit Sharon stuck by my side. She understood my drive, and even when we would borrow money from family and friends, she never held my poor business judgment against me. It was a good feeling to know that the person with whom you were planning to spend the rest of your life was on the same page as you.

As 1986 moved along and we attempted to lower our debt, it got to the point where literally every penny we made was going to bill collectors. Between the mounting interest and the fact that we made less than $30,000 a year between us, the financial hole we were in was getting deeper and deeper. Eventually the financial pressures became overwhelming, and we made the very difficult decision to declare bankruptcy.

In thinking back to when we were going through this nightmare, I remember there was nothing more unsettling than going through all of the paperwork that needed to get done. Technically, with a Chapter 7 bankruptcy, all of your assets can be liquidated and disbursed to the creditors. Sharon and I were nervous wrecks

over the process, and we felt sure that we would end up with nothing to our names.

We went into federal court and stood before the judge. He asked us what had happened to put us in this position. After answering the best we could, which included my attempt to fund a business, he then asked if there were any creditors present to protest the bankruptcy petition. The trustee stepped forward and declared there were no creditors being represented, and with one stroke of the pen from the presiding judge, our financial terror was over. Even though we knew our credit would be horrible for the next several years, it felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted off our shoulders, and to a degree it had. We didn't have any credit cards anymore, but who cared?

The fall of 1986 was a time for us to start rebuilding our financial lives. We had a fresh start, and we never wanted to be in that position again.

By the end of 1986 I started getting the wrestling bug again and came up with what I thought would be a great idea — a new wrestling magazine similar to the prototype I had come up with in college. After a bunch of research and a series of phone calls, I realized that unless I had some serious backing there was no way I could afford to do my own magazine, so I took a different route. Since the WWF obviously had their own magazine and both Jim Crockett Promotions and Watts's Mid-South Sports were on the verge of launching theirs, I decided to call some of the other promoters to see if they wanted their own magazine.

My first call was to Gagne's office in Minneapolis with the hope of creating an AWA magazine. I was immediately put in touch with Roy Nelson, their in-house agent and the person with whom I negotiated the AWA's participation in my radio show. During this conversation Nelson and I formed a friendship that has endured to this day, but, unfortunately, I learned the last thing the AWA needed was their own magazine. Their business was down and all of their funds were earmarked for television and arena shows.

Next on my list was Fritz's office in Dallas. But after briefly speaking with Ken Mantel, the World Class story sounded a lot like what Nelson had told me about the AWA's woes and their need to stay focused on television and live promotion.

Disappointed but not discouraged, I then called an unlikely source, who actually had something positive to say. Mario Savoldi was the front man for his father's promotion company, International Championship Wrestling. ICW was one of the groups I had struck a deal with for my radio show, so when I called Mario he acted as if he were my long-lost brother. Those who know him know how friendly he can be when he likes you. They also know how unfriendly he can be if he doesn't. Luckily, Mario liked me at the time. When I told him of the concept, Mario got all excited and said it was a great idea, but . . .

They didn't need their own publication because they were too small, but he told me of a new start-up wrestling magazine that was looking for writers and photographers. Mario had me call a woman by the name of Debbie Daigle, who was his publicist, and through Debbie I spoke with the editor of *Gold Belt Wrestling* magazine, Virginia Bowes.

Almost immediately Virginia and I hit it off, and she was quick to lay the groundwork for what she was looking for. She wanted someone to cover the Florida territory on a weekly basis and provide both stories and photos. I was hardly a photojournalist, but I knew I could handle this. And so, strictly on Mario's recommendation plus having a fairly decent résumé at that point, she hired me on the spot. Within a few days I had my first assignment, but not without some convincing on Virginia's part. I was still being blackballed by the Florida office, but Virginia convinced Gordon Solie that there would be no issues.

Upon instructions from Virginia, I called Gordon the next day. Although he did not remember our meeting from years earlier and the advice he had given me, he did explain that some in the company did not want me around, but he guaranteed that every courtesy would be extended to me unless I gave them a reason not to. I didn't want to make any excuses for what had happened previously — even though I thought the whole thing was ridiculous — so I promised Gordon I would do what I needed to do, not trouble anybody and leave without incident. Now seeming comfortable with me, Gordon instructed me to go to the Miami Beach Convention Center on Wednesday night and ask for Duke Keomuka, who I didn't know at the time was one of the owners of the company, or Frank Boscia, who was a marketing guy that worked for Chris Dundee, the local promoter for the Florida office. Chris was the older brother of boxing trainer Angelo Dundee and had promoted hundreds of fights, turning Miami Beach into a boxing center during a career that spanned six decades. Chris promoted eight world championship fights, including the February 25, 1964, Miami Beach bout in which Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, won the world heavyweight title for the first time with a knockout of Sonny Liston.

Given the wrestling landscape at the time, the Florida office welcomed anybody who was willing to give them exposure in the magazines. Had the territory been as healthy as it once was, I doubt I would have been so welcomed.

Although I was a good writer, I wasn't much of a photographer, or at least that's what I thought, but to keep the gig with *Gold Belt* I needed to produce quality pictures. So I decided to hire one of Sharon's friends, William Allan White, whom I knew from college and who was a pretty good photographer. I told Bill to meet me at the building no later than 6:30 p.m. for the 7:30 show.

I arrived at the building around 6:30, and there, sitting in the front lobby at this

little table, were Duke, Chris and Frank. As I approached the trio they clammed up. I apologized for interrupting and introduced myself and my photographer. While Chris and Duke pretty much ignored us, Frank got up, extended his hand and said, "Follow me." He led us to the back and brought us to what can best be described as a holding area.

He asked who I wanted to talk to and rattled off a few names. "How about Black Magic?" he asked. Although the wrestler would go on to have a stellar career as Norman Smiley, at the time Black Magic was just a jobber, and I wasn't about to let my first interview for a new magazine be someone who was not of substance.

After thinking for a moment, Frank said he had the perfect person and headed into to the dressing rooms. Within minutes he emerged with former Florida heavyweight champion and all-American football player at Florida State University Ron Simmons. Frank was right. Simmons was the perfect person. Trained in wrestling by Hiro Matsuda, he was one year older than me, and I remembered him from when he played against the Florida Gators. We spoke about the UF-FSU rivalry and quickly formed a friendship. Bill snapped a few pics, and we were pretty much done. From that point forward, whenever Ron would see me, he always went out of his way to say hello and talk about the Gator-Seminole rivalry, whether it was football, basketball or anything else we could think of.

I quickly went from being that notorious pain-in-the-ass to the guy who gave the wrestlers positive press. Once word got around the dressing room that I was a writer for a new wrestling magazine, everyone seemed to jockey for coverage, and I was only too happy to oblige; I no longer needed Frank to find someone for me to write about.

The following week, back at the Miami Beach Convention Center, I met Kevin Sullivan for the first time. Kevin was the booker, and I did a one-on-one interview with him. From the moment I walked into the back with Bill, kayfabe couldn't have been more alive and well. Kevin didn't know how "smart" to the business I was, and neither did I. So he treated me not only with respect, but with kid gloves. I also think he worked me a little as he told me about his first match as a pro in Montreal with a wrestler named Ferdinand Ferscoud, which he pronounced as suspiciously close to "for shit" as you can get. After that initial meeting, and after the article hit the newsstands, Kevin was one of the first people to break kayfabe and share the "secrets" of the business with me. It was before the so-called dirt sheets became ultrapopular and eons before the Internet became the place to get info. Kevin sometimes used me as a sounding board on angles, trying to get feedback from a fan's perspective. Every Wednesday night, whether it was in Miami or Fort Lauderdale, Kevin would ask me what I thought of TV that week. The casual

acquaintance eventually turned into a friendship, and years later he would introduce me to such people as Tony Rumble, Tod Gordon and Paul Heyman.

Years later, when Kevin became the booker for World Championship Wrestling, he and I would talk about all sorts of angles, mostly him telling me how ridiculous my ideas were. The more consumed he became with WCW, however, the further away we drifted as friends. But Kevin is the type of person that once he's your friend he will always be your friend, even after you haven't talked for years, which was the case when I called to interview him for Dusty's book. But if you ever get close to Kevin never cross him. After all, who in their right mind would cross someone who used to chew on beetle nuts, walk the streets of Calcutta and frequently got strapped to the Tree of Woe just for laughs?

Aside from meeting Kevin for the first time, this was also the first time I met Duane Long, who shot photos for *PWI*. A nicer guy in the world you could not find. On this particular night he wised me up that Bill kept getting in the way of the wrestlers when they fought outside the ring. Instead of backing off and moving away from them, Bill stayed where he was. Duane said some of the wrestlers were getting angry and warned that if Bill didn't watch himself, he would end up on his ass. There's nothing the wrestlers hated more than someone who got in their way.

I quickly pulled Bill to the side and told him to be sure he got out of the way. As Bill was short and stocky in stature, I knew that would potentially be a challenge for him as he wasn't exactly fast on his feet. Sure enough, before the night was over, Bill found himself on his derriere after getting right in the middle of two brawling wrestlers. Luckily, the office didn't say a word.

Bill was unavailable for the next few shows, so I began shooting the matches myself. Duane knew I worked for the competition, but he showed me the ropes, no pun intended, and taught me how to shoot from the corners to keep out of the wrestlers' way. I also paid attention to the protocol that was in place. It was as important to know what *not* to shoot as what to shoot.

The Wednesday night shows, meanwhile, were starting to take their toll on my personal life. By the time I got home and into bed it was well past midnight. I was still working at the gas station and had to have the place open by 6 a.m. One day I accidentally overslept, and we not only missed our morning gas business but the weekend gasoline delivery as well. I was a longtime family friend, but had I been anyone else my boss would have fired me on the spot. Instead he ripped into me pretty heavily, and rightfully so.

From that point forward he didn't want to hear the word wrestling out of my mouth again and warned me that if he did, despite how close we were, he would look for a replacement.

As fate would have it, however, I didn't have to worry about being fired for long. Sharon's cousin David was going into a new business venture and wanted to know if I would be interested in an entry-level position. He offered me virtually the same amount of money that I was making at the gas station, but instead of working from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. six days a week, I would be working Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and I would no longer be up to my elbows in petroleum products.

I accepted the job without hesitation. I soon started my position as a glorified executive assistant for a company called SpyTech, which had a storefront and office in Miami. Working for SpyTech was fascinating; I not only met some truly strange people, but it really educated me on both the good and bad aspects of business. It was also there that I met the unlikely person who really opened my eyes about the full potential of promoting.

It was around this time that I met my future wrestling business partner, Craig Cohen. One Wednesday night Craig introduced himself to me at the War Memorial Auditorium. Aside from frequently being the timekeeper for the matches, he often helped ex-wrestler Danny Miller, who was the local Fort Lauderdale promoter, with publicity and advertising. He had seen me interviewing the guys and shooting photos, but this was the first time we really talked. During our conversation I saw Kendall Windham walking backstage. I quickly excused myself from Craig and walked up to Kendall, who said hello and shook my hand with an ultrasoft grip; I had noticed nearly every single wrestler in the territory had the same dead-fish handshake.

For those who aren't aware, the kayfabe handshake, as some wrestlers call it, is a purposely light touch between wrestlers, showing that they work light in the ring and won't hurt you. Not knowing anything about this "secret handshake" — which, years later, Hiro Matsuda told me didn't exist and that I was being worked — I thought the limp wrist meant something entirely different.

As Kendall walked off and Craig walked over, I nodded my head in amazement and said under my breath just loud enough for him to hear, "Christ, are they all faggots?" Having witnessed the exchange, Craig began laughing and quickly smartened me up. And so, with my homophobia soundly in check, Craig saved me from further embarrassment and triggered a friendship that has been in place ever since.

Aside from later being my much smarter business partner, Craig holds his own little place in wrestling history. It was on a Wednesday in Fort Lauderdale, during Lex Luger's last week working in the Florida territory, before he went to work for Jim Crockett Promotions. Craig had brought his new 8-mm video camera to the show, and while he sat at the timekeeper's table performing his role for the night,

he taped the matches. On this particular night Luger would face Frank Goodish, better known to wrestling fans as Bruiser Brody, in what would become a legendary steel cage match.

Because Brody was scheduled to be in the territory for only a few weeks I got an opportunity to meet and interview him. Sir Oliver Humperdink, who was "managing" Brody, walked me into the dressing room area and led me to a private room off the main area. Back then, if you walked in to a dressing room unaccompanied and weren't one of the "boys," you could expect to walk out with your ass in your hands.

Inside the little room, Brody was already dressed for his match, except for his boots. As he finished tying his laces, he looked up at me and extended his hand. Like the others, he had a light touch.

As I began asking him questions, he began wrapping his fingers with white surgical tape, and his answers were short. He was quiet and seemed distant. We were about to do a computer match between him and Hogan in the magazine. When I mentioned this, Humperdink said something like, "I'd like to see that." Brody shot him a glance, smiled and said, "Yeah, me too." It's as if they had their own little side joke about the chances of that actually happening and what the outcome would be.

I tried to get Brody to warm up toward me, asking him the standard questions about his background. His answers seemed canned, as if answering them for the thousandth time, talking about West Texas State. He seemed to shrug off my questions, until I mentioned that one of my co-contributors at *Gold Belt* was a good friend of his, Tracy Ringolsby. That did the trick. Tracy and Brody went way back, and it was then that I learned Brody had once been an aspiring journalist. I think it was at that moment that Brody realized I wasn't a threat to him or the business. Almost instantly he became friendly, and after a nice exchange said very matter-of-factly, "If you really want to know what Bruiser Brody is all about, just watch the match tonight. That'll tell you everything you need to know." I noticed Humperdink smirking as he said this.

Just before the match, Bill showed up, and so with Duane there too from *PWI*, it was just the three of us shooting ringside, angling our lenses between the heavy wired fencing of the steel cage. The match would prove to be Bill's last night as a wrestling photographer.

The big question that everybody always asks is, "Was it really a shoot?" The answer you get depends on who you ask. Humperdink has claimed several times that Brody's actions were a rib pulled on Luger and that some of the wrestlers had been razzing him before the match, saying Brody was going to kick his ass and so

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

The infamous Bruiser Brody–Lex Luger Cage Match

on. Thinking back and knowing how protective Hump is of his friends and the business, I think that's just his way of protecting Brody's reputation. Luger, in Emerson Murray's book *Bruiser Brody*, is quoted as saying it was a rib, and while he admits he was scared to death, he also claims that afterward he and Brody sat down in the locker room and talked, resolving the issue.

There is also a videotaped interview with Luger in which he claims he walked across the stage to talk to Brody afterward. Brody had said he stopped during the match because he thought it wasn't working, and when asked if there was heat between them, Luger has said Brody said "No."

But that's not the way I remember it. As I recall, the match started off normally, and about five or six minutes into it, all of a sudden, it was as if a light switch was flipped and Brody just shut down, refusing to budge. Whatever Luger tried to do, Brody didn't sell it and just stood there, staring at Luger. After a few seconds of this, Luger turned to the referee, Bill Alfonso, and asked him what was going on. It was apparent Fonzie wasn't clued in because he kept trying to get the guys to work together. "Come on," he'd say, "Let's go!" After throwing a few more fists that Brody didn't sell, Luger turned to Fonzie again and told him to open the door. When he didn't comply, Luger seemed fed up. Seeming more pissed off than scared, he literally turned around, pushed Fonzie to the side and climbed over the cage.

I know Luger contends the two talked afterward, but that would have been pretty hard to do considering that back in those days, the babyfaces and heels were kept in separate locker rooms located on opposite sides of the War Memorial stage. As a matter of fact, it was the referee's job to bring the finishers from one locker room to the other because the guys didn't have a chance to talk before the matches as they do today. Luger contends in the videotaped interview that he walked across

the stage, but, in reality, as soon as he got to the back, he grabbed his belongings and bolted from the building without ever showering or changing. I believe he was out the back door before Brody even made it back to his dressing room.

I can't say for sure the two never spoke and worked out their differences, but, if they did, it didn't happen that night. There has been a lot said and written about that match, some of which is true, most of which is myth or hearsay. And aside from the original video copy that Craig still owns, most of the people who have seen the match have only watched a multigeneration, muddied video of it.

I remember asking Hiro years later about the incident, and he told me how angry he was at Brody for doing that to Luger — making him look bad. Apparently Crockett called him after hearing about the confrontation and gave him a hard time since Luger was tapped to be JCP's next big star. Crockett had already begun negotiations to buy the territory, and Hiro didn't want anything petty to jeopardize the deal.

So, was it really a shoot? I say yes, but not in the sense that Brody wanted to beat up Luger, rather he wanted to make him look bad because Luger was leaving the territory without doing the right thing and putting Brody over. To those of us who were there and actually saw everything that transpired, it was somewhat surreal because it was something you just didn't see. It was as though kayfabe was being broken in the ring.

But that would not be the only significant cage match I got to witness up close in which Luger participated. With Crockett now running shows all over the country, a few months later I shot photos of the Great American Bash at the Miami Orange Bowl. The main event was the second War Games/the Match Beyond cage match, which pitted Dusty Rhodes, Nikita Koloff, the Road Warriors (Hawk and Animal) and Paul Ellering against the Four Horsemen and the War Machine inside a double ring surrounded by a cage. On this particular night, the Horsemen were comprised of Luger, Ric Flair, Arn Anderson, Tully Blanchard with Dark Journey and "Big Bubba" Ray Traylor substituting for J.J. Dillon and working under a hood as the Machine.

There were two memorable things about this particular match. First, I showed up at the Orange Bowl right after work from SpyTech, and because the stadium was in a bad area of town I had decided to carry a stun gun for protection. About halfway through the show the South Florida humidity started getting to me, and I was sweating like crazy. The stun gun shorted out, and every so often I would get zapped. There I was trying to shoot photos around these two rings and zizz zizz zizz . . . Not funny. Second, this was the very first time I saw a wrestler blatantly juice with a razor blade. I had seen guys gig before, but it was always done discreetly.

Half the time I would wonder how they did it. But this time, less than three feet from my lens, Double A took a bionic elbow from Dusty, and when he hit the canvas, he took a straight-edge blade between his thumb and forefinger and raked it across his forehead with wanton abandon. Yikes! I never looked at a match the same way again.

After covering the Bash, Virginia started sending me to cover other shows too. World Class Championship Wrestling made a stop in South Florida, where I met the late, great Gary Hart for the first time. While their crowd was modest, I had two memorable experiences that night. The first was Gary sending me on a wild goose chase for someone who didn't exist so I could get press credentials — he thought I was just a mark with no specific purpose. The other had nothing to do with the matches.

A guy by the name of Howard Baum, whose father had previously run a small organization in opposition to the Florida office and would later become an acquaintance of mine, was also at the show shooting photos. I forget who he was working for, but when he asked me who I was working for my response was Kay Fabe. My answer prompted the comeback, "Oh, is that the Japanese guy at *Main Event* magazine?" While he was actually thinking of Cheh Low, the Chinese person who owned Pumpkin Press, being the smart-ass I was, I replied, "Yes." While that moment has always stayed fresh in my mind, Howard seems to have forgotten it. Well, that's what he says.

Before long Virginia had me writing and photographing more and more for *Gold Belt*. I not only wrote a ton of articles under pseudonyms like Sir Geoffrey Lang, Squirrel Stephens, I. Gomez and others in addition to my real name, I even starting shooting WWF house shows for the magazine. Back then, quality WWF photos were hard to come by since Titan had banned all competing photographers from shooting ringside. Virginia had been paying a small fortune for photos from Madison Square Garden that were snapped from the upper deck. In order to get the shots the magazine needed, I bought ringside seats at the 5,500-seat James L. Knight Center in Miami and smuggled my telephoto lens into the building.

By shooting the action not far from the ring, almost every wrestler at one point would look right at me during the card. Knowing I worked for a magazine, they would either hold still long enough for me to get some great shots or work their match toward me. Because they knew how to work toward a camera for TV it was easy for them to do. They knew how important exposure was, even if it wasn't in a WWF publication. The mid-card performers were more willing to play along than the main event guys. Every once in a while, after I was spotted, the wrestlers would turn their backs and work away from me, ensuring I would not get any

good pictures. It didn't happen very often, but when it did it bothered me because I knew that the one photo that would have ensured me a good payoff for the night would have come from that match.

And this not only happened at WWF shows, where I shot from the audience, it happened at NWA shows too, where I was permitted at ringside. While most of the guys were cooperative and friendly, some becoming good friends, every once in a while somebody would be in a bad mood, and I knew to stay out of the way on those nights. I'd be lying if I said I was welcomed at every show I shot. I wasn't.

There was one night at the Sunrise Musical Theater I will never forget because it involved a run-in with arguably the greatest performer of our generation. It was shortly after Crockett had bought the Florida territory. Danny Miller was the local promoter, and, as usual I was shooting the matches from one of the corners. Unlike other facilities, however, the ring at Sunrise was up on a stage, so to shoot the matches I had to shoot from the back of the ring. Most of the time the wrestlers worked away from you, so you had to be fast if you wanted to get the money shot. What was unique about this setup, however, was that you could actually hear the wrestlers call their moves in the ring because the crowd was so far away; the wrestlers weren't as guarded as they normally were. As a photographer, I had to pretend not to hear anything, but a lot of the times by listening I knew when the big move was coming and could prepare for it. On this particular night, aside from Danny being in the building, who had become a good friend and always let me have the run of the building, Frances Crockett was there from Charlotte to check out how things were being run. Suspiciously absent was one of the participants for the main event, "Nature Boy" Ric Flair.

About a third of the way through the show, Flair finally showed up, and he was livid. It seems the local taxi driver had taken advantage of him, and $50 later had dropped him at the building. Ric confronted two friends of Kevin Sullivan's who were just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jeff Gardner, who frequently accompanied Kevin to the ring as Abudadein, and William Blue, who drove the guys around South Florida, were always allowed in the back. Flair didn't care who they were and ordered them out of the backstage area. They didn't have to be told twice. From where I sat, an inconspicuous place backstage, I saw Ric disappear into the main dressing room.

I thought nothing more of it and went about my business shooting the matches, staying out of the way. As one of the mid-card matches was finishing up, I went into the back to prepare my camera for the main event, between Flair and Mike Rotunda. While I was loading my camera I heard the question, "Do you belong here?" I turned around. It was Flair. He repeated himself, "Do you belong here?"

"Yes. I'm shooting for *Gold Belt* magazine," I responded.

"What's your name?" he asked.

He had seen me shooting at ringside before, so I wondered what was wrong. "Howard Brody," I replied.

"Well, Howard, do you think we just allow anybody to shoot in our arenas? What benefit do you bring to Jim Crockett Promotions?"

I stared at him blankly.

"I asked you a question," he said, demanding an answer.

"Well, Ric," I began.

He cut me off. "You don't know me well enough to call me Ric. I asked you a question. If we allow you to shoot ringside, what benefit do we get out of it?"

"Well, you get magazine exposure," I responded. Meanwhile I looked over at Frances, who was listening to all of this with a somewhat knowing look on her face, but one that said "don't count on me for help."

"Don't look at her," he said. "I didn't ask her the question. I asked you." He then pressed me, "Don't you think we help you sell more magazines and put more money in your pocket? Don't you think we help you more than you help us?" I couldn't understand why he was acting like this. Before I could answer him, he said, "Take your stuff and get the hell out of here. I don't want to see you back here again." Flair then turned around and walked away.

Before I could do anything, Danny walked up to me and asked, "What the hell was that all about? What did you do?"

Frances finally opened her mouth: "He didn't do anything. Ric's in one of his moods because he got ripped off by a taxi driver." She then turned to me, "The best thing you can do is stay out of his way tonight. I'll have a talk with him later."

It was finally time for the main event, and as I always did, I headed to ringside to wait for the performers. But before I even made it out of the back, I saw Flair emerge from the dressing room and, taking one look at me, turn right around and go back inside. A minute later Danny came up to me. "You can't shoot ringside tonight," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Flair won't come out if you're at ringside. I'm sorry. You'll have to shoot from the floor."

If I was going to shoot from the floor, I might as well have not been there at all. I left the arena pretty upset, but I would get over it.

The NWA was back the following Wednesday night, this time at the Miami Beach Convention Center. It would be Flair against Chief Wahoo McDaniel in the main event. I got to the building early, and who's the first person who comes

through the back door? You guessed it! Flair.

I was expecting the worse. Instead I was greeted with, "Hello Howard. How are you tonight?"

"Good," I responded, dumbfounded.

Before walking into the dressing room he turned to me and said, "Get some good shots tonight."

The match was one of the most memorable I ever saw with Flair, not only because Ric and Wahoo chopped the hell out of each other to the point where you could see welts and broken skin on their chests, but because not a single move was called during the whole match. The entire match was done through body language. I also noticed that even though other photographers were at ringside, Flair worked toward whatever corner I was shooting from. At one point Flair gigged, and he hit the floor to get away from Wahoo right in front of me. There was no doubt about it, Ric was making sure I got the money shot and nobody else did. After the show was over, I was packing up my equipment and going over my notes when Ric came out of the dressing room. As he walked by me, I called out to him, "Ric!" Flair stopped and turned around. "Thanks!" I said. He didn't say a word. Instead, he winked, shot me a smile, turned around and proceeded out the back door, on his way to the next city or town. From that point forward I never had another issue with him or any other wrestler.

Eventually Mario Savoldi made his way to Miami and promoted an ICW card at Flagler Dog Track, in the heart of a predominantly Cuban area of the city. What was interesting was that there was not one Hispanic wrestler on the card. It was at that show that Mario asked me to do a feature story on a local wrestler by the name of Brian Carrerio who wrestled for ICW under the ring name the Terminator. As we were running short on time, Brian asked if I would meet him during the week at a local wrestling school. I didn't have a problem with that and thought it would be an interesting thing to see. The school was located in one of those long-term storage facilities, and I saw a bunch of familiar faces that I had seen on television. Among them were Aldo Ortiz, who became better known as Ricky Santana, and perennial WWF jobbers Joe Mirto and Rusty Brooks. Rusty, who I had actually met briefly at Mario's show, was one of the trainers. The main trainer was none other than Larry Simon, also known as The Great Malenko and father of Joe and Dean Malenko. I also met a wrestler by the name of Dr. Red Roberts and a promoter by the name of Patrick Schaefer, who was about to start a new wrestling company called the Global Wrestling Alliance (GWA). While I was interviewing Brian I couldn't help being distracted by Malenko and Brooks, who were teaching guys how take bumps, make comebacks and sell an offensive attack. This was wrestling

at its most basic, and to me it was more intriguing than any main event. It was that little glimpse of the true behind-the-scenes workings of the business that made me think I might have more of a future in it than just writing and snapping photos. Almost immediately I began showing up to the twice-a-week practices.

Before long the GWA was up and running and at odds with Mario Savoldi. Rusty and Red, who were working regularly for Mario, now gave their allegiance to Global, as Red was pegged to be the group's initial booker. I kind of got caught in the middle because both asked me what I knew about the other. It was my turn to kayfabe; I pretended I didn't know a thing. While I had a certain loyalty to Mario for pretty much ensuring I got the job with *Gold Belt*, Red, Rusty and Malenko welcomed me at their school with open arms. I was so welcomed into their little circle that Malenko had me get into the ring a few times to work as a referee during practice. He explained that the referee had the hardest and at times most important job in the ring because he had to know when to be seen and when to stay invisible, he had to be aware of the match time and know when to give the wrestlers the high sign to wrap up the match or, as they say in the business, to "go home."

Meanwhile, one night at the Sunrise Musical Theater while covering the Championship Wrestling from Florida matches, I noticed Red, Schaefer and a couple of their guys sitting out in the audience. When I kept looking out at the crowd, Craig came up to me and asked me if anything was wrong. I told him no but pointed out that the Global guys were sitting in the stands. Unfortunately Sullivan and Miller overheard me and asked where they were sitting. I didn't feel comfortable doing so, but I told them, not thinking they would do anything harmful. The next thing I knew the ring announcer was welcoming the dignitaries from the Global Wrestling Alliance to the show. You could see them sinking in their seats from embarrassment. I had involuntarily become a stooge for the Florida office, and I didn't particularly like it.

The following Saturday at the wrestling school, both Patrick and Red asked me point blank if I was the one who mentioned they were sitting in the audience. I lied and said I hadn't. I liked the fact that the two of them trusted me and allowed me to come to the school and talk openly with everyone. In a way I felt I had betrayed them. I think they knew the truth but let it slide. It was a lesson learned, and I never stooged out someone again and swore I would never put myself in a situation where I got caught up in other people's politics. Instead I focused on writing stories and taking pictures no matter how mundane it had become.

But not every story I wrote was ordinary. While the vast majority of my stories for *Gold Belt* were puff pieces, one of the things I was most proud of was that we were the first and only wrestling magazine of its time to publish something about

steroids in pro wrestling. After reading a story in the *Miami Herald* about the rampant use of anabolic steroids in the NFL, I pitched the idea to Virginia, and although she was reluctant, she let me tackle the issue. We did it in pretty sensational fashion too. Along with the story we ran an artist's rendering of a wrestler, who looked suspiciously like Hogan, in the crucifix pose on a hypodermic needle. While Dave Meltzer and Alex Marvez would expose the abuse of steroids in the business a couple of years later in the mainstream press, we were way ahead of the pack.

I interviewed about a dozen wrestlers, and although nobody admitted to using them, they all agreed it was a problem. One night, shortly after the story hit the newsstands, Kevin Sullivan cornered me backstage in Fort Lauderdale and warned me to stay clear of the Road Warrior because, as he put it, "Hawk was pissed." He also called two of the people I interviewed hypocrites, claiming both regularly used steroids. Around the time the issue came out many major newspapers and local TV news teams were breaking stories about steroids in pro and college sports. I knew I gambled on what the wrestlers would say to me, but I felt strongly that the issue needed to be brought to the public. Years later, when I became president of the NWA, I created an Internet-based awareness campaign called the Wrestling Coalition Against Substance Abuse (WCASA) to addressed the out-of-control use of steroids and substance dependencies.

I remember Randy and Bill Mulkey talking to me one night at a show in Orlando and proudly stating that they didn't need steroids to attain their physiques. Anybody who knew the Mulkeys, the most famous jobbers in pro wrestling at the time and two of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet, knew that their less-than-impressive bodies were perhaps more likely the result of eating tuna fish sandwiches than taking steroids. I suppose being the whipping boys of the NWA meant you didn't have to possess a bodybuilder's physique.

The guys from Global, meanwhile, didn't seem to mind the story at all, and Rusty, at 350 pounds, would sarcasticly say that he got his figure through steroid use. It seemed the more time I spent at the wrestling school the closer I became to the guys there, and every once in a while I would make a weekend jaunt up to Tampa to see Malenko's operations on that side of the state. Before long, Global was gearing up for its first TV taping at the Diplomat Hotel in Hollywood, Florida, with an interesting mix of veterans and young, untested talent. Some of the veterans included Cyclone Negro (managed by the Great Malenko), Raul Mata, Adrian Street, Jackie Pollo, Bugsy McGraw and the brother duo of Joe and Dean Malenko. Angelo Poffo, the father of Leaping Lanny and Randy Savage, was also part of the group, doing a sea captain gimmick and managing a team called the Predators, which was comprised of Shark Murphy (longtime Florida veteran Bob

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

Miss Linda and "Exotic" Adrian Street were two of the recognized stars who joined the GWA

Cook under a hood) and Brian "The Terminator" Carrerio, who had changed his named to Piranha Steele; Brian would get a nice little push in Texas a few years later, working as the Thing and feuding with Bruiser Brody. It was around this time that Patrick started dangling a carrot in front of me about creating a magazine for them. That's all it took to get me fired up on the project. Within a week I had come up with a mock-up for the GWA magazine.

Incorporated in May '86, the GWA was put up for public sale in late April 1987, with seven million shares of over-the-counter penny stock selling at 40 cents per share. The holding company that controlled the GWA penny stock was a Boca Raton group called Integrated Business Corp. Penny stocks are securities that sell for less than one dollar per share. Since information about the issuing companies is often scarce, they can be easy targets for deceptive brokers.

With trading active, the Global stock rose to as high as 75 cents per share, but the house of cards the company was built on came tumbling down. Although the company was authorized to issue 75 million common shares of stock at $.0001 par value, they never got close to that and ceased wrestling operations in early 1989, amid a major federal investigation around a penny stock scam that had netted F.D. Roberts Securities Inc. $67 million.

Not long after the group's first set of television tapings, the board of directors at GWA replaced Schaefer because he was supposedly going through money like it was water; $50,000 for their first two hours of television. Red replaced him, but neither Red nor Schaefer actually managed the company's finances. That job belonged to Scott Sherman, one of Integrated Business's managing partners, and George

Edison, their corporate attorney. Although Sherman and Edison were responsible for managing the company's finances — and at one point tried to negotiate with Randy "Macho Man" Savage through his father, Angelo Poffo, to get him to jump from the WWF to the GWA by offering him one million dollars in stock — the real financial kingpin at Integrated was its company founder and major stockholder, Daniel Tucker, the brother of F.D. Roberts's chairman, Leonard Tucker.

"F.D. Roberts apparently used every trick in the book to fleece unwitting stock purchasers in New Jersey, Florida and across the country," then U.S. Attorney Samuel Alito told the *West Palm Beach Post* in May '89. The licenses of 35 Roberts brokers — 16 of who worked in Boca Raton — were revoked for fraudulent sales practices and for charging exorbitant commissions.

The scheme was for F.D. Roberts to locate or create companies, which usually existed only on paper and had few or no assets, that would make an initial public offering of stock just as the GWA had done. F.D. Roberts would then purchase the stock in nominee accounts that its officials referred to as "dirt-bag" accounts. Roberts's stockbrokers would conceal their ownership in the accounts while they touted and sold the securities at inflated prices. The slick spiel the brokers gave — which often guaranteed investors incredible returns — lured investors and earned some brokers right out of college about $10,000 a month.

Brokers aggressively bought stock in companies in which F.D. Roberts officials had a financial interest, such as Integrated Business, which owned the GWA, a move calculated to net the company money and drive up stock prices. Clients who sought to get rid of their stock would be discouraged from selling, if they persisted, their sell orders were destroyed or their brokers were unavailable.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the scam came when a man named Enrico "Ricky" Galiardo, identified in New Jersey court records as an associate of Joseph "Joe Butch" Corrao, the alleged treasurer for the John Gotti crime family, was linked with the group. Former company officials later testified in federal court that the firm did indeed have ties to organized crime.

Investigators and prosecutors pursued and secured 30 guilty pleas. While Integrated Business's Daniel Tucker had to cough up $125,000 in penalties and repayments, F.D. Roberts's Lenny Tucker had to repay $4.3 million. Both brothers ended up serving prison time for their role in the scam.

With Red going from being their head of talent relations to their head of operations, Bob Roop was hired to be the GWA's new booker. With this new direction they hired Gordon Solie to do their television. It was a smart move. Gordon, who had found himself without work when Crockett took full control of Florida, could be that well-known face and voice the GWA brand needed as they used even more

untested talent than they had previously. Gordon not only gave the GWA's product stability but, in Florida, credibility.

But Gordon wasn't a hundred percent happy with Global. Shortly after being hired, Gordon went to South Florida on a Friday night for the two tapings the GWA would be doing the next day. Once a month, Global would shoot two episodes on a Saturday afternoon and then, after a break, shoot two more episodes in the evening.

Gordon called to tell me he was in town and asked if I wanted to meet him at his hotel. I had already made plans with Craig to hit some of the local strip clubs since Sharon was working, but I was always willing to spend time with the Dean. When Craig arrived to pick me up I told him that we had to make a stop to see Gordon, and he was thrilled. On the way though, per Gordon's request, we had to stop at a liquor store to pick up a small bottle of vodka — Gordon had a reputation for hitting the bottle. In his eulogy, Tom McEwan, an iconic newspaper veteran from the *Tampa Tribune* and a friend of Gordon's for nearly 50 years, said he should be inducted into the drinking hall of fame.

I scanned the store shelves, and there were so many different brands to choose from I didn't know which to go with. My first inclination was to buy a bottle of Stolichnaya. As a rib, Craig tried to talk me into buying a brand called Gordon's. Although we had become pretty good friends over the phone at this point, and years later I would affectionately refer to my mentor as "Gordon Stoli," I didn't think Gordon would appreciate it if I bought alcohol that brandished his name. As the clerk stood there listening, he asked if we were buying the vodka for Gordon Solie.

"How the hell did you know that?" Craig asked him.

"Just a guess," the clerk responded.

It took Gordon a few minutes to answer our knock on his hotel door, and he greeted us wearing his standard guayabera shirt and holding an ever-present Benson & Hedges menthol cigarette. "It's about time, Brody," he said, accepting the paper bag I presented to him, which contained the bottle of Stoli.

Sitting in a chair by the lone desk in the room, Gordon positioned himself toward us. He told us to take a seat while he opened the bottle and poured his vodka on the rocks.

"Would you like some?" he asked Craig, motioning with his drinking glass. He knew not to ask me as I didn't drink.

"No thanks," Craig said, as sweat began beading on his forehead.

It's not that Craig was nervous, he wasn't and neither was I, but we were both sweating like pigs. For whatever reason, Gordon did not have the air-conditioning turned on, and the combination of South Florida humidity and stuffiness in the room made it very uncomfortable for us.

Although I had spoken to him on the phone several times since he had left his job with the Florida office, this was really the first time we got to talk.

"So what happened?" I asked point blank. "Why did they let you go?"

"Who knows?" He said, sipping his elixir. "I guess they figure I'm too old for this shit — too old to do them any good." The "they" and "them" Gordon was referring to was JCP.

Over the years there has been some debate over whether or not Gordon was let go from his job or if he quit, as some members of his family contend. When JCP took over the Florida territory, Gordon stayed on, but within a couple of months he was asked to do another television show without any additional compensation. That's when the details get sketchy. The only thing that we can be sure of is that Gordon soon found himself without a job.

"Well, what about Dusty . . ." I began, "Couldn't he do anything?"

Gordon blurted out, "Fuck him, that fat tub of shit!"

Craig and I couldn't help but laugh out loud. Here was the most respected announcer in wrestling history swearing like a sailor.

It was obvious that Gordon was bitter. He felt that Dusty, being Crockett's booker and having a lot of stroke with the company, could have stepped up and kept the status quo or made things a little easier. After all, Gordon was to Dusty what Howard Cosell was to Muhammad Ali. While they both had their individual successful careers, in many ways their legends were intertwined. Gordon was there as Dusty transformed into the American Dream and Dusty was the star when Gordon first gained national prominence.

After calming down about Crockett, the conversation shifted to the GWA, and Gordon was apprehensive about the group's success. He felt they had too many untested young wrestlers and really needed some veterans to make a go of it. While he liked the enthusiasm of who they did have and had confidence in Roop's booking ability, he questioned whether their product would be credible without any big-name veterans. He seriously doubted they could draw with a roster that included only Bugsy McGraw, Ox Baker, the Iron Sheik and "Corporal" Kirshner to complement their young contingency.

I suppose Gordon's feelings finally surfaced because his marriage to Global didn't last very long. The GWA got wind that Gordon was getting ready to start a new Tampa-based promotion with Mike Graham and Steve Keirn. True to wrestling politics, when Gordon was fired, Red and Roop did a mock eulogy, basically saying his career was dead.

In a way it was quite ironic because, unbeknownst to them, the GWA itself was slowly dying. But they should have seen the telltale signs, such as the incompetence

they had to deal with on a regular basis. The brother-in-law of one of the GWA board members left a message for Red late in the day one Friday afternoon, stating "I got us on ESPN." Since he didn't leave his number and Red had no way of reaching him, all weekend long Red and Roop were on cloud nine. They knew through their contacts in the business that ESPN was paying Verne Gagne $4,000 a week for his AWA show, and even if they paid the GWA $3,000 a week, the cash infusion would help them accomplish nearly everything they hoped. But on Monday morning the bother-in-law finally got in touch with them, and when they asked for the deal specifics the guy said: "And we only have to pay them $8,000 per week!" That deal never materialized.

Although the GWA had no resources to do their own magazine as Schaefer had once promised, the thought of doing my own publication had again sparked my creative juices. I decided to see if I could land my own title, and I went for someone's jugular — my old friend George Napolitano.

While I was working for *Gold Belt* I had noticed the quality of *Main Event* had gone down with Napolitano at the helm, so I reached out to Cheh Low, the publisher, to see if I could get him to make a change. We spoke on and off for nearly two months. He was reluctant at first, but when he realized George was working for another publisher in direct competition to *Main Event*, things did not bode well for *Main Event*. After a series of conversations, Cheh pretty much agreed to what I was looking for, and we just had to make it official. We set up a meeting in New York to seal the deal. Meanwhile, he had hired an interim editor named Sandy Krebs, who would be in place until I started.

Before going to New York I contacted Roy Nelson, who was working for a major law firm there, and told him of my pending arrangement. Roy was networked in with a variety of sports agents and literary representatives, and I wanted him to look over any contract I got from Pumpkin Press. Since I would be working in the city, I also asked him to try to find some potential living accommodations for me and Sharon on Long Island. A couple of months earlier, I had introduced Virginia to him to help her secure a better deal with Mavety Publishing, the company that owned *Gold Belt*.

Before my meeting, Roy drove me around to different parts of the island and showed me the best places to live. When we stopped for lunch at a little cafeteria, Roy grabbed an envelope and said he wanted to show me something.

"You have to promise me you can't say anything about this," he said.

I kind of shrugged it off. "What do you have?" I asked.

"I'm serious," he said, repeating, "You have to promise me you can't say anything about this."

"Ok," I said, "I promise."

"I'm showing this to you because I'm your friend."

Roy then pulled the contents out of the envelope, a stack of papers with handwritten notes on them. The handwriting looked familiar. He then plopped it down in front of me.

I felt like Shelly Duval's character in *The Shining* when she sneaks a look at the work Jack Nicholson's character has done, only to find pages and pages of "All work and no play makes Jack a bad boy."

The handwriting looked familiar because it was Virginia's. The papers were stories I had submitted in the several months I had worked for her. In an attempt to build herself up, she had decided to tear me down. Every page was marked with crossed out text, syntax changes and in some cases complete rewrites. It's one thing if my writing had been as bad and unintelligible as she made it out to be, but the stories I had submitted for publication were changed very little before making it to print. This was a deliberate and egregious attack on me.

As I sat there with my mouth agape, Roy said, "She's no friend and there's no way I'm helping her."

I felt so betrayed because she was someone I had allowed into my home. Virginia had both my wife and I bamboozled. Not only did she stick a knife in my back, but she twisted it to ensure she would cause as much damage as possible. Only a few days earlier she had told me how great an opportunity it would be if I were to take the position at *Main Event*. She had said she was so happy for me. To me this cut was a hundred times worse than the one Napolitano had inflicted. To borrow a line from Dusty, who had once described someone who was hiding their true self to him, she was a one-eyed jack and I saw the other side of her face.

The next day I went to the Empire State Building for my meeting with Cheh. I put the nonsense from the day before out of my head, and planned to deal with it when I got home. After waiting in the reception area for what seemed like forever, Cheh came out and escorted me back to his office. We sat down, and immediately he started to tell me his plans for the magazine. He handed me the latest galley proof (an uncorrected pre-printed copy) of the current issue and asked me what I thought of it. As I began looking it over, I could see immediately it was a marked improvement over what I had seen in recent months, and when I began reading one of the articles that Sandy had written, I realized this guy was damn good with the pen. Cheh wanted to know when I could make the move to New York to start. Sandy and I had about the same experience, but Cheh liked my enthusiasm. The only thing I didn't care for was that Sandy had no idea I was there to take his job. When he was hired he thought it was a permanent position, not as

an interim fix. As far as he knew, I was there to be interviewed for an open writing position. The reality was, however, Cheh wanted me to talk to him to see where he would best fit in once I started; it was he who was being interviewed, but he didn't know it. Before being sent out to speak with him, however, Cheh asked me about Virginia Bowes.

"What about her?" I asked, curious that he would bring up her name.

"Is she a good editor?"

"She's okay," I said warily. "Why do you ask?"

Cheh explained that he had got a call from her the day before, inquiring about the editor's job, and she had mentioned my name — she apparently said that while I had some good ideas, my writing needed a lot of work, and I wouldn't make a good editor. I couldn't just sit there and be a punching bag. I told Cheh exactly what I thought . . .

Virginia was unhappy where she was and wanted to make more money. She always felt that, as a woman, she was underpaid, and she knew that the job at *Main Event*, which had a much larger circulation than *Gold Belt*, would give her what she wanted. I told Cheh that she knew I was coming to New York to finalize things and this was her way of trying to undermine me so she could get the job herself.

Cheh studied me for a few minutes without saying a word.

"I didn't like her tact," he finally said, breaking the silence. "I would never hire a person like that no matter how good she might be. She is lucky I don't call George Mavety and tell him she is looking for a new job." George Mavety was the publisher of *Gold Belt* and someone Cheh knew personally.

Although I was relieved that Cheh thought that way, I was still aggravated and unnerved: here I am getting ready to embark on something I really want, and this pariah is trying to screw me. In a way, I wished Cheh would have called George Mavety. If ever I wanted to slug someone, it was right then.

But I had to put that out of my mind. It was now time for me to chat with Sandy Krebs. After a few minutes of chatting at his desk, Sandy suggested we grab lunch and led me to a little restaurant a couple of blocks away. After about 10 minutes of talking with Sandy, I realized that he was as geniunely passionate about the wrestling business as I was. He not only came across as a professional, he was comfortable being a little off-color and out of the box. The main thing that stood out for me was that he didn't have that obnoxious self-importance I had found in other wrestling journalists.

After lunch, I told Sandy that I had remembered something I needed to tell Cheh before leaving, so I excused myself and went back Cheh's office. While Cheh wanted to know how the meeting had gone, I told him I had had a change of heart

and wouldn't be taking his offer after all. I told him that, after listening to Sandy and seeing his work, I thought he already had the right person for the job and that Sandy should be given every opportunity to succeed. While Cheh was shocked at my decision — and I was a little surprised myself — I told him that in good conscience I couldn't do to Sandy what Virginia was trying to do to me. I was too good for that.

I thanked Cheh for the opportunity, said goodbye to Sandy, who I now had a tremendous amount of respect for, and left with the knowledge that I would most likely never work for another wrestling magazine again. Believe it or not, I was okay with that choice. While I would have to work hard to do something else in the wrestling business, I still had my principles intact.

In a way, it was no different from how I got the nod over Alex Marvez, an established pro wrestling and National Football League journalist, to help pen Dusty Rhodes's book for Sports Publishing. When I learned Alex was interested in working with Dusty, I called him. Alex and I had a great history together because I basically broke him into the wrestling business and had known him when he was still in high school. I told him how much I wanted to write the book and asked if I could collaborate with him. Without hesitation, however, Alex, being respectful of our long-standing friendship and knowing how much writing the book would mean to me, graciously withdrew from the project. He didn't withdraw because I was a better writer or he thought I was best for the project, but because he knew I was competent, would be passionate about working with Dusty and it would fulfill a lifetime goal of mine, writing a book.

When I got back to Florida, I filled Sharon in, and she agreed I had made the right decision.

I now had some unsettled business with Virginia, who had accrued a fairly substantial balance owed to me for stories and photos I had submitted. Unlike other publications, where the magazine paid me directly, she had a deal in which she was paid a lump sum to run the magazine, and out of that money she had to pay any writers, photographers, etc. She owed me $3,125.

Within a few days, Virginia called to ask me how my meetings had gone. I told her I did not get the job. I didn't tell her it was my decision because I wanted her to think she cost me the position and perhaps still had a chance for it. She then put on this really phony act, telling me how disappointed she was for me. It made me sick. I then dropped the hammer and told her that I would need my money and couldn't send her any more material until I was paid. Without hesitation she promised to get the bill settled with me.

When a week passed and no money order arrived — that's how she always paid

me — I called her to see what the holdup was. Virginia promised again she would send it. Two weeks turned into three weeks, and then a month turned into two months. Virginia started ducking my phone calls. I eventually hired a collection agency. It wouldn't be until 1989 that I finally got the issue settled, and by then Virginia had been fired from *Gold Belt*. The collection agency recommended taking Virginia to court because all collection efforts were exhausted. When Virginia did not answer the summons to appear on December 13, 1989, a default judgment was entered. I had won the case but had no money. The only thing I could do was use the judgment as a levy against her if she either attempted to sell any property or keep a savings account, but they couldn't find any accounts in her name.

Three months later, Virginia tried to buy photos from Pete Lederberg, a friend of Craig's who shot for many magazines as a freelancer. Pete was aware of my issues with Virginia and gave me the blank check she had sent to him because, with the judgment, I could go after her bank account. I immediately turned over the information to my collection agency because the name on the account was not hers. After a little research we learned that Virginia Bowes wasn't her real name, it was her "work" name. Virginia was actually Catherine Ferrone. However, even under that name, she had no money in the bank. No property. Nothing!

I finally gave up. Besides, my mind was now focused on a new wrestling obsession — promoting. By the end of '89 Craig and I had founded and launched the Wild Women of Wrestling, and, unfortunately, I would never be the same again.

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know no way of judging of the future but by the past.

— Edward Gibbon (1737–1794)

FOUR

CHANGING TIMES

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

Championship Wrestling from Florida promoter Eddie Graham (center) receives an award for community service

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fadin'.
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'.
— Bob Dylan (1941–), "The Times They Are A-Changin'"

When Craig Cohen and I decided to start a professional wrestling company in 1989, the landscape of the industry was very different. There weren't hundreds of independent promoters and promotions out there. Only a handful of promoters across the country worked outside the boundaries of the wrestling establishment, and they were considered "outlaw" groups by those who controlled the industry. Also unlike today, the local outlaws actually worked together. Not only did they often use the same crew of wrestlers, they worked together when scheduling their shows, used the same ring and, like the more established companies, honored each other's territorial boundaries. While there were always a few who strayed from the pack, for the most part there was a code of honor in place.

For as far back as there has been a wrestling establishment, there have been outlaws. However, back in the day when an outlaw promotion sprang up, they were often paid a visit, sometimes by more established wrestling stars who would go into the ring with their counterparts and stretch them, sometimes by local police and fire marshals looking for violations to shut their shows down, sometimes by state athletic commission representatives to ensure all the paperwork was in place and even sometimes by crooked-nosed thugs who would show up in the middle of the night. It was a dirty business.

Some old timers, including Dusty Rhodes, claim that wrestling, in many ways, used the mafia's blueprint. You can't help but acknowledge the similarities.

After the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) was officially formed in 1948, the sport was carved into slices, and everyone at the table ate well. Every so often there would be a flare up between promoters, but those issues were usually solved quickly. Even after the American Wrestling Association (AWA) was formed in 1960 and the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) was founded in 1963, nobody at the table ever tried to eat off of someone else's plate. Anyone who tried was immediately stopped by the family. That would change in the early '80s, when Vincent Kennedy McMahon, also known as Vince McMahon Jr. or simply Junior, began to expand his company nationally, first buying up key NWA territories and then going head-to-head with the rest. In the meantime, the professional wrestling hierarchy was intact, with their unwritten agreement to honor territorial boundaries and recognize each other's champions.

While Junior would certainly be the one to stir the turbulent promotional brew of the '80s, his idea of a national promotion company in opposition to the establishment was hardly original. In late 1974 Pedro Martinez, a small-time promoter from upstate New York who ran the Buffalo and Cleveland territories and was not part of the wrestling establishment, hooked up with Eddie Einhorn to launch the International Wrestling Association (IWA).

Einhorn, who had a lot of clout in the broadcasting industry, bankrolled the project, and for the first time an outlaw group had the money to compete with the established industry. Einhorn had founded the TVS Television Network to telecast college basketball games to regional networks in 1960, when the sport was of no interest to the national networks. By 1980 he had sold his interest in the network to become the head of CBS Sports, and later he became a minority owner of the Chicago White Sox with Jerry Reinsdorf.

The IWA was the first wrestling company to offer guaranteed contracts to wrestlers. In January '75, sporting a roster that included such established stars as Ernie Ladd, Mil Mascaras, Ox Baker, Dick "The Bulldog" Brower, Ivan Koloff, the Mighty Igor and the Mongols, the IWA began shooting television in Savannah, Georgia.

To counter the IWA's move, the established promoters worked together. For example, in an attempt to keep the IWA off of television in New York, Eddie Graham, the majority owner of the Florida territory, sent his tape to Vince McMahon Sr. so the World Wide Wrestling Federation could put the show in a time slot meant for the IWA. But the block didn't work. Because of Einhorn's connections, the IWA's syndicated wrestling program hosted by Jack Reynolds and Tex McKenzie ended up on an even more powerful TV station — New York's WOR channel 9.

This head-to-head competition became commonplace. In the Carolinas, Crockett was fending off the outlaw promotion at every turn and frequently battled them in court as well as at the turnstiles.

Unlike the companies that attempted to present a national product in opposition to the World Wrestling Federation/World Wrestling Entertainment years later, the IWA was not done in by a lack of funds or a shortage of talent. What ultimately caused its demise was its inability to get into the major arenas, which were locked up by the established promoters. According to Einhorn, in the 2003 book *Chokehold* by Jim Wilson and Weldon T. Johnson, the IWA's inability to get into Madison Square Garden and the Nassau County Coliseum on Long Island, among other prime facilities, was the reason the company failed. The IWA was forced to run in facilities not conducive to wrestling, like Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City, New Jersey, and the Beacon Theatre in Manhattan.

After sinking an estimated $500,000 into the IWA, Einhorn pulled the plug on his investment and the company folded. Martinez tried to keep the business alive by bringing in Johnny Powers to be his partner, but that was short-lived. While they had previously done business together in New York and Ohio, they ran the Carolinas for only about a year in opposition to Crockett before they ran out of

money. As for Einhorn, it would not be the last time he would try his hand at pro wrestling.

The old guard was safe . . . but not for long. The concept of a national company intrigued Junior, and being the son of one of the most powerful promoters of the establishment, he set wheels in motion. While a lot of the old-timers say Junior was nothing like his old man, Vince Jr. likely learned how to go against the grain from his father. Even though the elder McMahon was loyal to his cronies, when it came to business, he was not above being a little bit of a rebel himself.

In 1953, the same year Capitol Wrestling Corporation joined the NWA, they brought Vince Sr. into the company to replace his father, Jess. Jess had co-owned Capitol Wrestling with legendary wrestling promoter Toots Mondt, and together they were a formidable force. Vince Sr. and Mondt became a successful team too, and in some ways Vince had a better head for wrestling than his father. Within a short time, Mondt and Vince Sr. controlled about three quarters of the NWA's booking, leveraging their dominance of the heavily populated Northeast, with cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, DC, under their promotion umbrella. Mondt showed the second generation McMahon the ropes of the wrestling business and how booking worked.

By late 1962 the NWA stronghold, which included promoters Sam Muchnick from St. Louis, Frank Tunney from Toronto, Fred Kohler from Chicago and Doc Sarpolis from Texas, among others, were unhappy with the direction of the booking. The NWA recognized an undisputed world heavyweight champion who traveled from territory to territory defending the belt, and at the time the champion was "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers.

The rest of the NWA didn't like that Mondt rarely allowed Rogers to wrestle outside of the Northeast. While Mondt and McMahon wanted Rogers to keep the title, the other promoters wanted to put it on someone who would be willing to work the circuit regularly. For the NWA the decision to pull the strap off Rogers was easy because he was unwilling to put up the $25,000 deposit required to insure he would honor his commitments as champion.

When Rogers put over Lou Thesz for the title in a one-fall January '63 match in Toronto, it led to Mondt, McMahon and Capitol Wrestling leaving the NWA in protest and giving birth to the World Wide Wrestling Federation. By April, Rogers was awarded the new WWWF world championship following a fictitious tournament victory in Rio de Janeiro.

Rogers lost the title to Bruno Sammartino a month later, after allegedly suffering a heart attack a few days before their match. Supposedly to accommodate Rogers's condition, the match was booked to last under a minute. There has always

been a shadow of doubt over the match, with some claiming the heart attack story was concocted by Rogers because he didn't want to put Sammartino over, and so the less time he had to spend in the ring with him the better. When Rogers was alive he claimed the heart attack was legit and was the only reason he gave up the title, arguing that Capitol would never have left the NWA otherwise. Sammartino always claimed Rogers was full of baloney, citing that poor attendance in New York triggered the title switch and Vince Sr. bringing him back from Toronto, where he had been working for Frank Tunney after he had initially been cast off and blackballed by McMahon. As the other story goes, in order to get Rogers in the ring with Sammartino, Rogers was not told of the planned title switch. It was only when both men met at the center of the ring that Sammartino informed Rogers, "This is it," and when he put Rogers up on his shoulders for a backbreaker, Sammartino told him to just give up, to which he complied.

With Capitol Wrestling withdrawn from the NWA and promoting under its own banner, the territory was no longer under the protection of the rest of the "wrestling family," and Jim Crockett Sr. began to make a move into the Northeast. However, because Mondt and Muchnick had parted on good terms, Muchnick was able to get the rest of the NWA members to apply pressure and make Crockett back off his invasion plans. As part of the deal brokered between Muchnick and Mondt, Vince Sr. sat on the NWA board of directors, no other territory was recognized in the Northeast and the WWWF champion would not be recognized as a "world" champion. Over the ensuing years, to show there was a working agreement in place, there would be a series of title versus title matches, usually resulting in draws or double disqualifications.

As television began to play a more important role in promoting pro wrestling, Mondt's influence in the business started to weaken, as he was basically an old-time arena booker and was never able to grasp television. In 1965 Mondt stepped down as the wrestling promoter at Madison Square Garden and turned it over to his business partner. Mondt had a terrible gambling addiction, lost his focus, and allowed the business-minded McMahon to squeeze him out. Vince Sr. bought Mondt's shares of Capitol and, despite their clashes over the years, kept his former partner around as a salaried employee out of loyalty. In 1976, after a long illness, Mondt died nearly penniless.

In '65, some NWA promoters were talking about reunification with the WWWF. Sammartino had become so incredibly popular that he was picked to defeat Thesz, becoming the first wrestler to simultaneously hold both the NWA and WWWF titles. Sammartino, only getting every other weekend off as WWWF champ, balked at the idea when told that he may have months with no time off. Reunification talks

ceased when NWA officials selected Gene Kiniski to replace Thesz.

In late June '76, a week before America's bicentennial celebrations, Vince Jr. played a big role in the Muhammad Ali versus Antonio Inoki fight. The younger McMahon helped coordinate more than 150 closed-circuit TV locations across the U.S. to broadcast the match. In many cities — Atlanta, Chicago and Houston among them — the match was the last bout shown in conjunction with a live wrestling card. While the specific broadcast depended on the local wrestling territory it was seen in, locations also got to see the Andre the Giant versus Chuck Wepner match from Shea Stadium, which McMahon promoted.

Because of the closed-circuit broadcast's huge draw from coast-to-coast, the door was open for the McMahons and the Japanese to do more business. Two years later, Hisashi Shimma, the chairman of New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) and one of its bookers, became the figurehead president of the WWWF. While in that position he negotiated a talent-sharing arrangement between NJPW and the WWWF and opened the door for Japanese junior heavyweights like Tatsumi Fujinami and Satoru Sayama, as Tiger Mask, to gain international prominence.

In March 1979, at the urging of Vince Jr., the World Wide Wrestling Federation changed its name to the World Wrestling Federation and began using the shortened WWF moniker. The change was purely cosmetic, however, as the ownership and front office personnel remained the same. Later that year, Vince Jr. and his wife, Linda, purchased the Cape Cod Coliseum in Massachusetts, where they promoted hockey games and concerts in addition to pro wrestling. Vince Jr. wanted to prove to his father, as well as himself, that he would be capable of running the WWF after his father's eventual retirement.

Meanwhile, with the Japanese presence appearing to be solidly in place at Capitol Wrestling, rumors began circulating in the front office that Vince Sr. was entertaining the idea of selling controlling interest of the company to NJPW's founder, Antonio Inoki, and his Japanese partners. In what appeared to be a precursor to that transaction, and as a favor to Inoki, Bob Backlund dropped the WWF title to him during a December '79 tour, only to take the belt back at the end of the tour.

A short title switch was pretty commonplace. The NWA title was swapped on three different tours of Japan between All Japan Pro Wrestling's Giant Baba and Jack Brisco (in 1974) and Harley Race (in 1979 and again in 1980). In a cloud of controversy, however, Shimma, acting as WWF president, overruled the decision, claiming interference from Tiger Jeet Singh, and declared Inoki to still be the champ. Inoki refused the belt, however, and Backlund regained the vacant title after returning to the U.S. The Inoki victory over Backlund is still not recognized

by World Wrestling Entertainment and the switch was concealed from WWF fans until *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* began publishing the results of matches in the late '90s.

As 1980 came into focus and with rumors in full force, some of Vince Sr.'s old cronies began to bail from the company. Junior, meanwhile, incorporated Titan Sports and soon had his eye on his father's empire. When the elder McMahon learned he had cancer in 1982, he sold Capitol Sports to his son. Linda and Vince McMahon Jr. now owned the WWF under the corporate structure of Titan Sports. Vince Sr. succumbed to his illness in May 1984.

Under Vincent Kennedy McMahon's leadership, the WWF soon became the largest and most powerful professional wrestling organization in the world. However that label didn't come easily to the McMahons. After taking complete control of the company, and despite his father's warnings, the younger McMahon set the groundwork for an international expansion program that would enable him to promote in opposition strongholds, such as Los Angeles, St. Louis, Chicago and Miami, and assemble the greatest collection of wrestling talent since the major promoter trusts of the mid- and late 1920s.

Although unfounded, there have been stories claiming Vince Sr. tried to get others in the business to stop his son from expanding the WWF. While that may sound contentious, it is common knowledge that Vince Sr. was unhappy about his son going head to head with his former associates. One has to wonder what drove that reluctance. Was it really because he didn't want his son to put the old guard out of business as many claim? Was Vince Sr. really that loyal? Did he feel some kind of obligation to the NWA because they didn't put him out of business 20 years earlier when they had the chance? Or was he afraid of what the old guard might try, such as strong arm tactics that could endanger his son and family?

To Vince Sr., wrestling was still a dirty game. As for Vince Jr., he was on a mission. For him and his wife, it was success or bust.

By late 1984, Titan Sports was on the verge of bankruptcy. Owing money to creditors because of their carefree spending, the McMahons gambled that their investment to expand their brand would pay off. Part of that investment was the purchasing of key regional companies, such as Jack Tunney's territory in Toronto, Mike LeBell's territory in California and Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW), on what would later be referred to in the industry as "Black Saturday." But with Muchnick, the glue that held the NWA together, retiring from the wrestling business and *WrestleMania* just around the corner, the stage was set for the WWF to forge ahead on its own terms.

The following year the company grossed in excess of $75 million and brought

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

Ric Flair (top) and Barry Windham were both key to JCP's success

professional wrestling into the mainstream and to nontraditional wrestling fans because of their ties to celebrities like Mr. T and carrot-topped rocker Cyndi Lauper, who was the centerpiece of the WWF's Rock'n'Wrestling PR campaign. All of a sudden it was cool to be a wrestling fan.

It seemed almost destined for the McMahon and Crockett families to battle it out for wrestling supremacy. After all, if not for Muchnick persuading the other NWA members to apply pressure to Crockett Sr. in '63 when he began his assault on the elder McMahon's territory, the outcome of the war between the promoters might have been very different.

Despite what groups like the American Wrestling Association, the Universal Wrestling Federation (UWF) and World Class claimed, the second largest promotional company in North America during the '80s was Jim Crockett Promotions (JCP), and they were the only group besides the WWF that arguably promoted nationally. Operated by the Crockett family, who also owned the Charlotte Orioles minor league baseball franchise at the time, the company was based in Charlotte, where Jim Crockett Sr. had started his company in 1931. Attracting more than one million paying customers annually, the flagship promotion of the NWA was most famous for its annual Starrcade super cards, which regularly grossed more than $500,000, and its Great American Bash extravaganzas.

With a strong collection of pure wrestling talent — including Ric Flair, the multitalented multi-time NWA world heavyweight champion who was generally considered the best grappler in the industry — the NWA tried to promote its wrestlers as athletes rather than cartoon characters. Although every so often they would present a goofy gimmick — like the New Breed who were supposed to come from the future or Lazertron, who was supposed to be from outer space — the NWA presented itself seriously, with wrestlers involved in longer and much faster-paced matches than their comic-bookish Titan counterparts.

While JCP produced two weekly syndicated television programs, they did not get national exposure until they took over the WTBS time slot on Atlanta's SuperStation from McMahon. Once their spot on WTBS was secured, and considering they had expanded their market penetration with the acquisitions of Championship Wrestling from Florida and the Universal Wrestling Federation, they were ready to go head to head with the WWF on a national stage.

Unfortunately, Crockett grossly miscalculated his battle plan and soon found himself millions of dollars in the hole, which forced him to sell his company to Turner Broadcasting.

While fingers will always be pointed, a lot of critics blame Dusty Rhodes's elaborate spending and questionable creative direction for JCP's demise. In *Dusty: Reflections of an American Dream*, Rhodes claimed it was Crockett who didn't pay attention to his spending and that he should have stepped forward to take control. While that statement is debatable, I agree with it. Part of Crockett's problem was that Dave Johnson, his bookkeeper, didn't tell him just how bad things were getting. According to Rhodes, as well as others, Johnson waited nearly a full year before dropping the bomb on Crockett as to just how much he owed. As Dusty so aptly put it in his book, "My job was not to sit in there with Dave Johnson and tell Jimmy Crocket you're five million dollars in debt."

The fact that JCP was a small regional promotion until the mid-'70s not only illustrated the importance of having a major television contract, talented wrestlers and fresh ideas in order to promote nationally and survive, it proved that a group must have a focused businessman in command.

The majority of JCP's debt was accrued by spending too much too fast. Aside from paying a small fortune to the WWF for their TBS time slot, over a two-year period Crockett consolidated six NWA territories under his banner, including Bob Geigel's territories in Kansas City and St. Louis (which he had bought from the retiring Muchnick in January '82), Championship Wrestling from Florida and Bill Watts' Universal Wrestling Federation, which has been reported to have come with a $4 million price tag.

Some have claimed Watts asked McMahon to buy him out, talent contracts and all, and, in an attempt to apply pressure, threatened McMahon with an antitrust lawsuit in New Orleans (since Louisiana was the only state operating under the Napoleonic code of laws, which meant a judge could decide the outcome based on precedence). As the story goes, McMahon balked at the offer and instead suggested Watts try to sell his territory to Crockett and come work for the WWF. Supposedly Watts thought he could actually win the case but didn't want to wait for it to go to trial, knowing he would be out of business by then. Apparently taking Vince's

advice, he contacted Crockett and convinced him that McMahon was going to pay him a huge amount of money to buy him out, and that once Vince had all the top UWF guys, there would be no way for Crockett to compete. It would only be a matter of time before the WWF would put him out of business. Some rumors even have Jim Ross as the architect of the scheme to fool Crockett.

But there has always been something about that story that didn't sit right with me. While some of it makes sense in a bizarre sort of way — this is professional wrestling we're talking about — the plot sounds too much like an Oliver Stone conspiracy. In order to get the scoop, I reached out to the "mastermind" behind the idea and asked J.R. what the real deal was.

You know what? Amazing things happen when you ask straight questions. You get straight answers.

As J.R. recalled, Watts never approached Vince about buying the UWF. J.R. said he was scheduled to fly to Atlanta to meet with Crockett and Rob Garner, who would fly in from Charlotte. (Garner was Crockett's in-house licensing guy and the person I worked with to license sound bites when syndicating my *Squared Circle* radio show.) At the meeting they were going to discuss doing copromotions between JCP and the UWF. The idea was for them to work together a couple of times a year on joint shows, primarily in the Superdome. J.R. was at the meeting because, for whatever reason, Watts didn't particularly care for Crockett, and didn't want to go to the meeting. I suspect Watts was still upset at Crockett for getting him bumped off TBS, but I can't say for certain.

J.R. had his marching orders and knew Watts was essentially burned out, so he asked: what if Crockett wanted to buy the UWF so he could better compete with Vince? J.R. asserted Watts had not considered that possibility, and they discussed a number just in case JCP showed interest.

J.R. got together with the Charlotte guys in a meeting room at the Atlanta airport, and near the end of the meeting he brought up the subject of JCP buying out Watts. J.R. recalled Crockett was intrigued by the idea and began negotiations immediately. The deal was finalized in a matter of weeks. J.R. said the call to Vince wasn't necessary because if Watts was burned out and ready to sell, Crockett would be aware that the next call would be to McMahon.

This makes a lot more sense than the version of the story that has been floating around. Despite Crockett's ego being a factor in his overspending and overexpanding, he would have enough sense to know if he was being worked. By all accounts, Crockett's weakness was not his negotiating, but his failure to recognize the telltale signs of a failing business.

After the buyout, Crockett made another error, however, by allowing creative

decisions to directly affect his newly acquired territory. With the exception of just a few guys, nearly all of the UWF stars were buried in matches against their NWA counterparts. Instead of keeping the brands separate and having successful, and potentially lucrative ongoing UWF versus NWA storylines that culminated in an annual "SuperBowl" pay-per-view, which is what Watts had envisioned, JCP destroyed the concept by putting all of the NWA talent over and cherry picking the wrestlers they thought were the best draws and casting some very talented people aside.

An interesting footnote to this story is that while Crockett never offered Watts a job after the sale was complete, the Cowboy eventually did go to work for Vince several years later.

For me, as someone who was perched on the fringe of the business as a writer and photographer and waiting for his opportunity to get to the next level, it was fascinating to watch the industry unravel from the inside out. Although there were a lot of moving parts in the war being played out, the final battle lines were about to be drawn, and the outcome would determine the fate of many people, some of who knew only wrestling. The whole industry was in flux because a couple of megalomaniacs had decided it should change.

In an attempt to turn his dream into a reality, unlike the old-time promoters who aired rasslin' on Saturday morning television simply to sell more arena tickets on Saturday night, Vince McMahon Jr. developed his aggressive — some might say ruthless — strategy to promote his brand.

By blanketing cable television with WWF programs, McMahon established a national demand for the likes of Hulk Hogan and Roddy Piper. He was able to syndicate his somewhat glitzy style of wrestling in virtually every major TV market in the U.S. He struck at the very base of his competitors' business and was able to lure companies like Gillette, Bic, Beatrice Foods, 7-Up, Southland Corporation (7-Eleven food chains) and Coleco Industries into becoming national sponsors. In some cities, like St. Louis and San Francisco, Titan Sports paid television stations more than $100,000 a year to put the WWF on the air. McMahon was once quoted as saying he had been warned he'd wind up at the bottom of a river if he persisted in playing hardball on his competitors' turf.

"They're mad at me because now they have to work hard for a living," he told *Sport Illustrated* (the '85 issue with Hogan on the cover).

In terms of television exposure, McMahon's empire consisted of two shows a week on the USA cable television network, *Prime-Time Wrestling* and *All-American Wrestling*, which were the fourth- and seventh-highest-rated programs on cable; two shows per week on WOR-TV (the New York superstation from Secaucus, New

Jersey), which were picked up by cable systems around the U.S; a weekly nationally syndicated program on more than 100 stations; occasional special-event shows on MTV, pay-per-view cable services and closed-circuit theaters; a 90-minute show that substituted for NBC's *Saturday Night Live* several times a year dubbed *Saturday Night's Main Event*, for which they reportedly got $450,000 per show and which gave them wrestling's only major network contract; and a Hulk Hogan cartoon series on CBS that debuted in September 1985 and lasted for one year. At one point they also produced a show for USA called *Tuesday Night Titans*, which was an offbeat parody of the *Tonight Show* and hosted by McMahon. Poor ratings, however, led to its cancellation.

While McMahon has contended that he was not out to create a monopoly — although it certainly looked that way when he bought World Championship Wrestling (WCW) from AOL/Time Warner in March 2001 — by the early '80s he had his rivals in the throes of paranoia.

In June 1984 a number of angry promoters held a summit in a hotel near Chicago's O'Hare Airport. They formed a stop-McMahon coalition called Pro Wrestling USA, which took aim at McMahon's major cities. The group combined the talents of the NWA and the then still strong, AWA. Also at the meeting was Eddie Einhorn, who Gagne brought along as his TV "consultant" — the same Eddie Einhorn who 10 years earlier had tried to put many in attendance out of business.

Einhorn was no stranger to playing hardball, and he helped the coalition create a syndicated show designed for a weekend morning slot on WPIX-TV, another one of New York's superstations. Many people believe that if Einhorn would have hooked up with Gagne or Crockett 10 years earlier, the face of wrestling would be very different today. The WPIX time slot cost the group a steep $440,000 a year.

But Gagne and his cohorts appeared to be too disorganized to cause McMahon much trouble, and he dismissed them with contempt: "The first meeting they had, all they could agree on was that they hated me and that they were going to do everything possible to put us out of business," Vince told *Sports Illustrated*. "At the second meeting, they couldn't even agree on ordering lunch."

Considering the personalities involved, it's not surprising that what McMahon said proved to be true, as Gagne and Crockett had a falling out when the AWA began hogging the program and didn't promote the NWA talent as promised. At the time, Einhorn even suggested that the group's best hope was for McMahon to run out of funds while trying to compensate stations for air time.

One of the promoters in attendance was none other than Jerry Jarrett. In an email exchange I had with Jerry, he vividly recalled the anti-McMahon meeting:

[F]or the first time in my life, I realized that the old NWA was really a syndicate – an old worn out syndicate, but a real syndicate nevertheless. Eddie Einhorn had called all us godfathers together for a sit-down to discuss how we could rid ourselves of the dreaded Vince McMahon, who had broken the Trust and dared to compete in our sacred territories.

Someone from St. Louis — you know those people have always been gangsters — suggested we just take Vince out. Eddie Graham screamed at the guy to shut the fuck up because the room had not been checked for government bugs. I don't recall the morality issue coming up about killing Vince, just being overheard.

Einhorn then pitched us [the idea of] working together, for God's sake, for the common good. What a crazy idea — wrestling people working together. Before any discussion could take place, a hotel executive knocked on the door and advised Einhorn that Vince was on the phone and said it was urgent. Several voices suggested that Vince should have sex with himself. I spoke up and said I was curious as to what Vince had to say. Graham agreed, so Einhorn took the call.

When Einhorn returned he advised the group of Vince's comments. McMahon said, "Eddie, you're from the world of baseball and you don't understand wrestling and never will understand it but you really should listen to me because I do understand wrestling. Wrestling people can't and will never work together. Democracy doesn't work in our business. Corporate structure will work in baseball, but it will not work in wrestling. The only system that can be successful in wrestling is a dictatorship and you couldn't get the people in that room to elect a den mother for a night. Get out of this business before you embarrass yourself."

Somebody, in a very accusing voice asked, "Is that all the bastard said? You were on the phone a long time."

Einhorn replied, "As a matter of fact he said none of you guys would ever trust me, an outsider, because none of you trusted yourselves." At this point, the silence was painful. Einhorn continued: "Vince went on to tell me that he knew wrestling looked like a simple business and he was sure that I felt that because I was successful in other businesses, that I felt I could run a wrestling company. Vince went on to warn me, 'I'm a third generation wrestling promoter and this is the most difficult business in the world.' It looks so easy and that is the trap door because it makes money angels get in and they don't get out until their tapped out. Eddie, don't get tapped out — get out!"

> At the time, none of us knew if Vince really said what Einhorn reported to us. However, it worked. We agreed that Graham and I would be bookers and we would do the tapes in my towns of Memphis and Louisville. We taped eight weeks of television, ran them in New York and had a sellout house at the Meadowlands. But how wise Vince McMahon's vision turned out to be.
>
> Watts pulled out before the show started that night. Crockett pulled out the next morning. Gagne pulled out with all the gate receipts and tried to carry on with Einhorn and without the group. Vince kicked every NWA promoter out of business except me down in Memphis.
>
> Many years later, Vince confirmed his call to Einhorn, although he could not recall the content of his conversation.

Almost a month later McMahon struck back at the heart of the failed coalition, and if they weren't paranoid enough before, they were about to be pushed over the edge. On Saturday, July 14, 1984, "Black Saturday," the WWF debuted on TBS, pulling what was described as a death shroud over Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW), an institution with millions of fans. With McMahon having TV clearances on both TBS and USA, he suddenly seemed poised to dominate the wrestling world.

At the urging of local Georgia promoters, who were growing frustrated with Ole Anderson, majority stockholders Jack and Jerry Brisco sold their stake in GCW to McMahon for a reported $900,000 plus guaranteed jobs. Promoter Paul Jones, not to be confused with the wrestler of the same name, sold his stock too, and McMahon then had controlling interest in the company. Jim Barnett, who was also a partner in GCW, initially did not want to go along with the deal as he didn't want to go against people he had been doing business with, some of who he considered close friends. He once confided to another promoter that he didn't want to "deal with the devil." But, realizing he would end up with nothing if he didn't, he worked out a deal for himself that in essence guaranteed he, too, would have a job at Titan. McMahon promptly closed down GCW and took over the company's TV contract, getting the TBS time slot.

Within days of "Black Saturday," the TBS switchboard was jammed with thousands of phone calls from upset viewers. Some fans started a national campaign to get GCW reinstated. Shortly thereafter the TBS mail room was flooded with thousands of cards and letters demanding they kick the WWF off the air.

When McMahon got word of the complaints, he responded in an *Atlanta Journal Constitution* article, saying, "We'll show those complainers the difference

between a major league and a minor league production, given time."

But time would not be on McMahon's side.

As the complaints poured in, TBS decided to listen to its viewers, and two weeks after the WWF debut, the station granted a 7:30 a.m. time slot to Ole's new upstart group, Championship Wrestling from Georgia. Gordon Solie was back doing the play-by-play, and Southern-style wrestling was back on TBS. Everybody seemed happy — except Vince.

Had he finally bitten off more than he could chew? Had Vince's ego finally got the best of him? In hindsight it appears McMahon flinched and revealed a chink in his armor-plated pocketbook.

Outraged that he had just paid almost a million dollars to secure airtime on TBS only to see them give a potential competitor a time slot, McMahon broke his promise to produce a separate weekly TV program for TBS. Instead of taping shows at TBS's studios as agreed, McMahon began airing tapes of his other syndicated WWF programs. But that created another issue for McMahon: programmers wouldn't swallow the fact that viewers could watch almost identical WWF shows on either the USA Network or through syndication.

The once promising relationship between Turner and McMahon further fell apart when TBS, upset over the WWF's ratings, which were much lower than what GCW had been averaging, gave a one-hour Sunday evening time slot to Bill Watts's Mid South Wrestling. Hosted by a young Jim Ross, Mid South Wrestling was drawing better ratings than the WWF by its second week.

Although the WWF had produced two taped shows each week for Turner, *World Championship Wrestling* and *The Best of World Championship Wrestling* — which had a combined audience of 3.5 million homes and ranked second and third among cable TV shows — McMahon and Turner realized they could no longer work together and reached an agreement that would get McMahon out of his TBS obligations. In a complex transaction, McMahon essentially sold the rights to his time on TBS to Jim Crockett Jr. for one million dollars, thus ending one of the most tumultuous business relationships in wrestling lore and laying the foundation for the bitter WCW–WWF promotional war of the '90s. At the time of the split, McMahon also claimed that Turner actually tried to buy the WWF.

For McMahon, the sale to Crockett helped him finance future *WrestleManias* — extravaganzas that during the first few years grossed more than $12 million each, between live gate receipts, pay-per-view and closed-circuit revenues and the sale of *WrestleMania*-related merchandise.

But the deal was not without collateral damage. As part of the agreement, Crockett would have exclusivity on TBS, which meant Watts lost his Sunday time

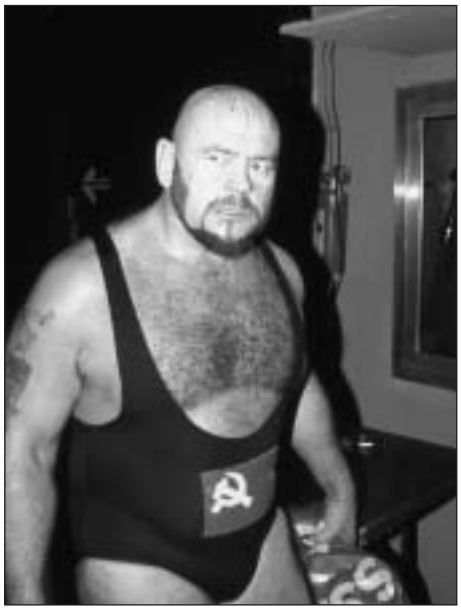


PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

Despite being a former WWWF champion, "The Russian Bear" Ivan Koloff stayed loyal to Crockett during the NWA-WWF war

slot and Ole had to forfeit his Saturday morning spot on the network. While Watts would sell out to Crockett, Ole eventually worked a deal out with Crockett to go back to work for him.

The ensuing war between McMahon and Crockett had many casualties. Although many smaller promoters hoped for miracles, they were swallowed up by the larger lions of the business. These men of courage who had tried to make a go of it on their own became part of the overall conglomeration of promoters working for larger companies. The offices of the once thriving territorial system fell like dominos.

In roughly what amounts to a seven-year period, the entire face of professional wrestling changed. As the old guard of the territories closed, new promotions began to spring up in their place, but more often than not they were underfinanced and didn't seem to have the same allure to fans. They closed almost as fast as they opened.

Nelson Royal opened up a small group in the Carolinas. Mike Graham, Steve Keirn and Gordon Solie opened a new group in Florida that Dusty Rhodes later bought. Sometimes the same players were involved, but they couldn't recapture the magic of their past glory. Such was the case when Jim Crockett Jr. opened an office in Texas. After he went belly up he went into the ice cream parlor business. I still have a hard time picturing the onetime most powerful man in the NWA asking patrons, "One scoop or two?"

Eventually one of the last of the old promoters — Don Owens in Portland — closed up shop, leaving Jerry Jarrett in Memphis as the sole survivor. The systematic office closings by the established groups and ultimate death of the territorial system is what allowed the new breed of promoters to emerge as the '80s came to a close and the '90s began.

The independent groups — those not affiliated with the older, established NWA or AWA organizations — began to appear, and in some cases they actually flourished

for a short time. Among the countless groups was one run by Rob Russen in Florida, one run by Jody Hamilton in Georgia and the group that was truly the predecessor to ECW, Herb Abram's UWF.

It seemed inevitable that when the last shot was fired and all the smoke cleared, that only two promotional powerhouses left standing — the WWF and JCP — would slug it out for control of the wrestling universe. And while we all know how that war ended, it was the annihilation of the old territory system that created the need for shows to be brought to the small towns, which had been abandoned by the major groups. *That* is what really opened the industry up for the horde of independent promoters who would soon follow . . . me included.

Being privileged to watch these events unfold as they did was quite a learning experience, although I never realized it at the time. Looking back at what some of the industry's biggest players did and failed to do, it never ceases to amaze me that some promoters who go into business today don't have a clue about the wrestling business, yet they think they will succeed on a grand scale. What Vince said to Einhorn about the trapdoor is true.

Being in the right place at the right time with the right product gives you an opportunity to succeed, but it doesn't guarantee success. For me, it was the emergence of these indie groups combined with the failure of the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling (GLOW) in the late '80s that enabled my business partner, Craig, and I to gamble and enter the pro wrestling promotional foray with the Wild Women of Wrestling — WWOW!

In the business world, the rearview mirror is always clearer than the windshield.
— Warren Buffet (1930–)

FIVE

EUREKA!

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

With Craig Cohen (center) and Dana Taylor (right) in Orlando at a JCP/NWA event

I will prepare and some day my chance will come.
— Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)

During the waning days of Championship Wrestling from Florida, Craig Cohen and I would take periodic road trips across the Sunshine State to see shows, especially after Jim Crockett Promotions took over. Sometimes just the two of us would go, other times there would be a parade of different people, like Dana Taylor, who did some ring announcing for the NWA in South Florida, Bruce Owens, who periodically refereed, and Howard Baum, whose father had once run a small organization in opposition to the Florida office.

Most of the time we'd drive to Tampa, the epicenter of Florida wrestling, home to the old Florida territory office and the famous Malenko Wrestling School. Our typical weekend jaunts usually consisted of leaving Fort Lauderdale at mid-afternoon on a Friday, getting into the bay area early Friday night, having dinner at one of a dozen dives and then spending time at one of several strips clubs. Saturday mornings were typical too. After the obligatory breakfast at the Waffle House, it was off to Professor Boris Malenko's wrestling school to watch some of the new guys work with some of the local veterans. Afterward it would be a trip to see either Gordon Solie or Danny Miller, and then on Saturday night we would either catch a WCW show if they were in town (sometimes we'd coordinate the road trips around a Sunday pay-per-view) or one of the local indies, or, if there were no shows, it was back to the strip clubs until I would feel guilty enough to leave — I was still married, and my wife, Sharon, was back home.

Thinking back, those road trips were fun, but they also helped shape me as a wrestling promoter. But like those long drives up and down Florida, the journey to becoming a promoter was not quick.

There are often defining moments in life, when a self-discovery is made and you say to yourself, "Eureka!"

For me that defining moment in pro wrestling came during a Sunday afternoon visit to Craig's condo in South Miami. We were talking about wrestling and a possible road trip to Tampa when he broke out with, "You know, we should really do our own wrestling shows!"

Eureka!

Since I was no longer working for *Gold Belt*, I thought it was the greatest idea in the world. But it wasn't necessarily the first time such a concept had crossed my mind. A few months earlier I had been involved in not one but two meetings about buying or starting a wrestling company.

It all started shortly after Gordon was fired from Global, when he, Mike Graham and Steve Keirn started a new wrestling company called Florida Championship Wrestling (FCW) (not to be confused with Championship Wrestling from Florida, which was sold to Crockett). At the time I was still working for SpyTech in Miami, and one day, while I was on the phone with Gordon Solie, a couple of men came into the showroom.

"Gordon," I said, as I put down a copy of *Gold Belt*, "I'll have to call you back. A couple of customers just came in."

As I hug up the phone, one of the men asked in a thick New England accent, "That wasn't Gordon Solie you were talking to, was it?"

Perhaps he guessed correctly because of the wrestling magazine on my desk. He

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

In the sound studio with Gordon Solie and Frank Loconto

was probably just making a joke. Before I could answer him, Ed Sklar, the co-owner of SpyTech, came out to greet the duo and swiftly led them into a back showroom for a private discussion.

Ninety minutes and more than $100,000 later, Ed emerged from the back showroom with the two men and handed me a pro forma to enter into the computer. They were private investigators, and Ed had sold them equipment for their new surveillance van.

Once again one of the guys looked at my wrestling magazine and asked, "Are you a wrestling fan?"

After Ed made some kind of smart ass comment to the effect that I was an idiot for following wrestling, I said, "Well, I wrote for this magazine," handing it to him.

"I can't get enough of it," he said, flipping through the pages. "So, was that Gordon Solie you were talking to?"

"Yes."

"Really?" he pressed, "So you really know him?"

"Yes, I really know him."

"Well, I'd like to meet him," he said. "By the way, my name is Dan."

Dan Fisher and his partner, Dan Cone, were two PI's based out of Pompano Beach. While Cone thought wrestling was stupid, Fisher was a fan who really loved watching it. He was the typical closet wrestling fan of the '80s; he would never admit to it in public, but put another fan in the room and it was yap central. His family was from New Hampshire, and while he was 10 years older than me, he began talking about the old WWWF days with Bruno Sammartino, Killer Kowalski, Haystacks Calhoun, Chief Jay Strongbow and Gorilla Monsoon. To put it bluntly, he was a big-time mark. But that was okay. I was a mark too, and in many ways I'm still a mark — and I don't mean to use the term in a derogatory way either.

While Ed never really cared for wrestling, as long as the client was happy and spending money, he encouraged me to talk about it freely. Eventually Dan came to the matches with me, and we began socializing.

Dan was a bit of a hard ass, but he opened up to me about his family and his somewhat tainted past. He came from a wealthy family that developed real estate and owned granite quarries in New Hampshire. Although he was quite wealthy, as in multimillions, he was the black sheep. Instead of going into the family business, he wanted to make it on his own. He had been so depressed when working for his family that he battled the bottle, calling himself "a fall down drunk who used to do a lot of puking." Once he left the Fisher roost, he sobered up and settled down. Dan was married to a woman a bit younger, and they had three small children. The private investigation company would be one in a series of businesses he would open and close through the years. Eventually he moved back to New Hampshire and re-embraced the family empire, but when we met he was a PI who was happy he had finally found someone to talk to about something he truly loved — pro wrestling.

When Craig and I planned our next Tampa road trip, which was to see an FCW match at the Florida State Fairgrounds between Jerry Lawler and Kerry Von Erich, we took Dan along. Also along for this trip was Dana Taylor. Instead of the typical two-night sleepover, we decided to leave Saturday morning and return Sunday. The whole way up it was wrestling talk 101.

After checking into the hotel we relaxed until the show. Gordon had left us some tickets, and after finding our seats, I set off to find Gordon. I tracked him down, and although he was busy as hell, he came out to say hello. I introduced him to Dan, who was like a pig in slop — mark heaven. Gordon apologized for being abrupt and, after excusing himself, headed off.

The matches themselves were not memorable, and the building was nowhere near capacity. Craig, Dana and I had been to many Championship Wrestling from Florida shows both before and after Crockett bought the territory, and this just didn't have the same feel. It just didn't flow. By today's standards it would probably be revered as one of the greatest indie shows of the year, but back then it just fell flat. Dan, however, loved it. Were the rest of us becoming desensitized to the business? Afterward it was the typical Tampa fare. I passed on the usual strip club hopping so Dan wouldn't be left alone. He didn't want to be tempted to drink, and for me the routine had become pretty old. We just hung out at the hotel and shot the breeze.

The next day, being the typical wrestling fans we were, we dissected the show and found ourselves trying to talk each other into believing that it had been a really good show. On the whole, we had a good time, and Dan was now one of us, sort

of. On the drive home he started asking a million questions — everything from the personal lives of the wrestlers to aspects about the business itself, like how much we thought the show cost to put on, how much did we think they took in at the box office and what would something like that cost to advertise. Clearly Dan was hooked.

Before long Dan would call me at home and at the office to talk wrestling, and I didn't mind because that was my mentality too at the time. Then one day he invited me over to his home: he had an idea that he wanted to discuss with me. I thought maybe he wanted to start a wrestling magazine because I had dropped hints that I'd like to start one of my own. Dan wanted to do something publishing related too, except it wasn't a magazine he had in mind.

"I want to publish a tell-all book about the wrestling business," he said to me, while we sat at his kitchen table sipping iced tea. "I think fans would love a book about the real inner workings of the industry, from who's gay and who's taking drugs to what it's like to live on the road and being with a different groupie every night. It'd be like *Hollywood Wives*, except instead of if being about the movie industry, it'll be about wrestling."

Hollywood Wives was a *New York Times* best seller written by Jackie Collins that was a fictionalization of the entertainment industry in the early '80s. While I was initially shocked, I was also intrigued by the idea. Looking back, it really was a brilliant idea because there was nothing like that in the marketplace. But then I started thinking of the ramifications. . . . When Dan offered me several thousand dollars to ghostwrite his book under the name "The Executioner" and the title "Wrestling Unmasked" — and, believe me, Sharon and I could have used the money at the time — I turned him down flat. Wrestling was a business I loved, and I wanted to be a part of it; I did not want to do anything to harm it. In the grand scheme of things it probably wouldn't have mattered, but my mindset at the time was: "How could I expose wrestling like that?" Although I didn't think Dan was just another guy who wanted to hurt the business, I thought if I let him continue down that path, he might. If he wanted to write this tell-all book, he was going to have to do it without my help. Luckily Dan dropped the idea when I refused. I then tried to convince him to back me in a magazine venture, but he felt that unless it was presented like the *National Enquirer* it wouldn't make money.

Not long after that I was speaking to Gordon, and he mentioned FCW was looking for an investor or investors to give them the capital they needed to expand. He explained that he, Steve and Mike had started FCW by putting in $7,500 each and added a lot of sweat equity to get it to where it was, but they owed money and needed working capital. When I asked him how much they needed, he told me

they were looking for about $200,000, which would take them out of the red and give them what they needed to continue. I immediately thought of Dan.

After a series of back and forth phone calls, I arranged a meeting between Dan and the FCW ownership. Prior to the get-together, Dan told me he would be willing to put up $250,000 immediately and commit up to $2 million to make the promotion work, but he wanted 51 percent control. His thinking was that the first $22,500 could go to each of the three to pay their initial investment back, then $27,500 could pay off the FCW's debt and the remaining $200,000 could be for working capital. The other $1.75 million would be held in reserve. My role would be to head up advertising and public relations as a salaried employee, which was pretty much what I was doing for SpyTech at the time. I would also get a very small percentage of the ownership from Dan's 51 percent, although he would retain voting control of my shares. Excited by the prospect, I told Gordon of Dan's investment plan, and he was all gung ho.

I told Craig of the upcoming meeting, since he was my best friend, and he was excited too, knowing that if something came about he would be involved to some degree. But the day before Dan and I were scheduled to drive to Tampa to meet with Gordon and company, Craig called and said Danny Miller wanted to speak with me.

"What about?"

"He wants you to meet with someone else before meeting with Gordon."

Craig had shared with Danny that Dan Fisher and I were going to Tampa to meet with the FCW ownership. Like Craig, I respected Danny immensely, and because he had always been nice to me, I felt I owed him the courtesy of at least a phone call.

When I telephoned him, Danny explained that Hiro Matsuda and George Scott wanted to start a new company and were looking for an investor. While in my mind the deal with Gordon was all but done, I gave Danny the benefit of the doubt and agreed to his request for Dan Fisher to meet with Hiro and George the night before our 10 a.m. meeting with the FCW trio.

At first Dan was not happy that I had agreed to meet with another group because he wanted to walk into the meeting with Gordon and company with a precise strategy and walk out with a deal. He knew that I had shared his investment plan with Gordon, and although Dan was not thrilled, I explained to him that Gordon thought it was great. So as we were driving up, he too thought the deal was all but done. For the majority of the long drive, Dan explained to me how he wanted to negotiate with Gordon, Steve and Mike and what the deal breakers were as far as he was concerned. Neither of us gave the meeting with George and Hiro a second thought.

Just so he was informed, I did give Dan a little overview of their credentials. I explained that aside from training guys like Hulk Hogan, Lex Luger, Paul Orndorff and many others, Hiro was responsible for getting the Florida territory out of the red before they had sold their company to Jim Crockett Promotions. As for George, aside from being a wrestler who got his start in the late 1940s, he was perhaps most famous for being a booker. He had made Crockett's Mid-Atlantic territory one of the hottest promotions in the country during the late '70s and early '80s, and he had been the creative force behind the WWF when they had become a national phenomenon in the early and mid-'80s. George was no stranger to ownership either. In the late '70s, while still booking Mid-Atlantic, he and Jim Crockett Jr. had bought into the Toronto territory owned by Frank Tunney's nephew Jack. His share of the company was worth about $100,000. Several years later, when Tunney sold his territory to the WWF and before George went to work for Vince McMahon Jr., Scott sued his former partner. While he would eventually get a half-million-dollar settlement in the early '90s, he accumulated more than $100,000 in legal fees. For now though, he and Hiro were seeking an investor for something new.

Shortly after 8 p.m. we heard a knock on our hotel room door. Danny Miller entered, flanked by George Scott and Hiro Matsuda. After making the introductions, Danny excused himself and left the room, leaving George and Hiro alone to talk with us. It was a little awkward at first but Dan, not being shy, broke the ice.

"So, what do you have?" he asked. "What's on your mind?"

"Danny [Miller] says you're interested in starting a wrestling company," George responded.

"Well, we came up here to see about buying into FCW," I said.

Fisher cut me off, "Yeah, but we haven't committed to anything yet." Again he asked point blank, "What do you have in mind?"

Scott and Hiro looked at each other, and it was obvious George would be the mouthpiece, although Hiro spoke up when necessary. "We want to start a new wrestling company," he began.

George explained what he and Hiro had in mind, right down to the talent they planned to use. They discussed their background and presented verbal résumés. Hiro would oversee operations, while George would handle TV, talent and booking. Danny Miller would be hired to promote the towns. Hiro produced a spreadsheet showing us what Championship Wrestling from Florida made in its last year, before selling to Crockett. George showed us similar documents for the companies where he worked as a booker. They had done their homework, and the presentation, although a bit unorthodox and falling short of professional, was pretty impressive.

Dan then asked the magic question: "So, what's this going to cost? How much do I need to bankroll?"

"Fifty thousand," Hiro spoke up.

Dan shot me a glance and then looked back at Hiro. "Fifty thousand?" he asked.

Hiro shook his head in acknowledgment.

Thinking perhaps the amount was too steep for Dan's blood, George said the reason it was $50,000 was to cover a lot of up-front costs. "We'll need to be on television six to eight weeks before we can start running house shows," he explained. "Once we start to do that we should generate enough cash flow through ticket sales to be self-sufficient."

"Maybe we'll need another 20 or 25 thousand maximum," Hiro added, "but that's only if we cannot draw. The boys get paid on what we draw at the gate."

That is the one thing that to this day sticks out in my mind — there would be no guarantees to the talent. George said guarantees may be okay for the bigger companies but would be the kiss of death for a small company like this one. He said he didn't know how long Crockett could continue paying what he was paying, and he also explained that before the first *WrestleMania*, Vince had almost gone bankrupt because of a large overhead that included some big guarantees.

"So we're talking like 70, 80 thousand tops?" Dan asked.

"I think that's a bit on the high side," George said, "but yes."

After a little more talking, the meeting was wrapped up, and Dan said we would be in touch. After they left, Dan lit a cigarette. I could tell he was contemplating their proposal.

"Well?" I said. "What do you think?"

Dan stared at me and after a long pause said, "Call Gordon and cancel the meeting."

"What?"

"There's no need," he said. "We can do business with these guys and it'll cost $200,000 less."

I was flabbergasted. "Yeah, but Gordon and them have an established company already. They have their TV in place. They have their talent. With this new thing it's a roll of the dice. Who knows if it'll even get off the ground?"

"Maybe, but I'd rather gamble $80,000 on these guys than a quarter-million on guys who've already lost money." Dan paused, took a big puff, and pointed a finger at me. "Besides, your buddy Gordon is trying to screw us."

I immediately came to Gordon's defense. "He wouldn't do that," I said. "Look, [Gordon] said they needed $200,000. He didn't specify for what. Let's see what

they need that for. Let's see what kind of paperwork they show us."

"These guys just told us it's gonna cost 50,000 with maybe another 20 or 25 behind that," Dan reiterated. "Gordon wants 150,000 more . . . for what? Hell, I didn't even bring up that I'd be willing to put in $2 million with these guys. They strike me as being conservative, and I'd rather go in with that mind-set than saying we need $200,000 when we don't. What are they gonna do for 150,000, blow me? Hey, Gordon, when I say 'blow me,' I mean 'blow me.'"

I knew the meeting would now be a waste of time, but I felt we still needed to listen to what they had to say. And while I could certainly understand, from a dollars and cents standpoint, where Dan was coming from, I also felt he was being a bit childish.

"Well, we're up here already," I reminded him. "Let's just see how the meeting goes tomorrow morning, and if you still feel the same way after we meet with Gordon and them, we'll call George and Hiro back."

After a little more arguing, Dan reluctantly agreed.

The next morning Dan was up early and ready to go. I knew he wanted to get the meeting over with and was only going through the motions to appease me. Although the meeting was scheduled for 10:00, we were finished with breakfast a bit early, and we got to the Sportatorium about 30 minutes early. It was a little weird for me: the last time I had been to the building was 16 years earlier, when I was trying to get a job. After sitting in the van for about 10 minutes, Dan got a bit antsy and insisted we go in and get the meeting started.

Inside it was dark and musky, and there was nobody to greet us. When we called out, "Hello?" a voice from an upstairs office invited us to "Come on up!"

We made our way up the rickety wooden stairs, and in the first office behind an old desk, sat Mike Graham. "Good morning," he said, greeting us with a smile and a firm handshake. "You must be Dan and Howard?"

We introduced ourselves, and before we could explain why we were a little early Mike affirmed that Gordon and Steve were on their way. Dan, hiding his emotions, seemed content and cordial, saying, "We have plenty of time."

But then something happened that was unexpected.

"So what do you guys want to do?" Mike asked.

Dan was caught off guard. "Maybe we should wait for the others."

Mike brushed off the suggestion. "We can get started; they'll be here soon enough."

Hesitantly, Dan proceeded to tell Mike what he had in mind — what we had discussed, and what I had shared with Gordon.

"Well, there's no way I'm going to give up 51 percent," Mike said matter-of-factly. "Now if you want to buy me out . . ." Mike started going into this

dissertation about how his father had started the company — which was untrue since this was a new promotion — how it was his family's blood, sweat and tears that had made it into what it was, how wrestling was in his blood and all this nonsense that had nothing to do with anything. He then said, "I'd be willing to sell for, um, $2 million."

I thought Dan was going to pass out, and, quite frankly, so was I. Instead he turned to me and stood up. "Come on Howard. The meeting is over."

Just as he got up, Steve Keirn walked into the office. It was about five after ten. "Sorry I'm late," he began . . .

"That's okay, we've just finished up."

"Why?"

Mike spoke up and told Steve what just gone down. You could see the look of disappointment on Steve's face. After Dan shook Steve's hand and apologized, Gordon turned the corner and walked into the office.

"Just getting started?"

"We just finished," I told Gordon.

Gordon was confused. "Hell, I didn't think I was that late."

"You're not late Gordon," Graham said, "But I'm not going to give up control of the company."

"Well, we haven't even talked about structure yet," Gordon replied. "Let's just sit down and talk about this."

Steve agreed and asked us to please sit back down. Grudgingly, Dan retook his seat and reiterated his plan and position. While both Gordon and Steve seemed willing to go with the plan, Graham continued to be a wrench in the works. Apparently, the partnership they had in place was predicated that all three unanimously agreeing to something of this nature before it could take effect.

Gordon and Steve tried their best, but they couldn't undo the damage Mike had done. Dan was not going to do business with Mike, and he certainly wasn't going to pay him $2 million for something that was in the red. To me it was obvious that Gordon and Steve were pissed. From my previous conversations with Gordon I knew that unless someone stepped forward with cash they would soon be out of business. Thanks to Mike Graham's greed that opportunity was walking out the door.

When Dan and I got back into his van he shot me a look that said "I told you so," but he said nothing for almost an hour. Once he started talking, however, I couldn't shut him up. "I told you your buddy Gordon was going to try to screw us. I knew it. He told Mike exactly how much I wanted to put into this, and that's exactly how much he asked for. Screw these guys. When we get back home, call Hiro and George."

For the next five hours it was, "Your buddy Gordon" this and "Your buddy Gordon" that.

When I got home I called Solie, and before I could say anything he apologized. "I don't know what the hell the matter is with that kid," he said. "He really fucked things up."

"He certainly did. Why did you tell him about the $2 million?"

"Well, I certainly didn't think he would be stupid enough to ask for all of it."

Although Dan had one foot out the door before the meeting even took place, Mike Graham's greed was the deal breaker. If Mike had been sincere and laid things out from a real business perspective, I believe that some type of accord could have been reached. But that no longer mattered. FCW was out of the picture, and the new players were George Scott and Hiro Matsuda.

On Dan's request I set up a meeting, and, per Hiro's instructions, we gathered at a Denny's, between Tampa and Fort Lauderdale. I wish I could say this meeting turned out better, but I can't. It was even briefer.

We all sat down, and Dan said he was ready to put the money up to get the company started. He then said he would put another $200,000 in reserve to ensure the promotion had enough funding. Both Hiro and George seemed happy with that, but then came the deal breaker.

"How do you want to structure this?" Dan asked. "I have an idea, but I'd like to hear what you have in mind."

George said he envisioned a three-way partnership, with him, Hiro and Dan all having equal shares.

"What about you, Hiro?" Dan asked. "Do you agree?"

"Yes," he said, although he seemed uneasy.

Dan said, "How about you two guys split 49 percent and I'll retain 51 percent so I can protect my investment . . ."

Before Dan could finish, George interrupted him. "I wouldn't be interested in that. There's no way I'm going to work 18 hours a day and not have the ability to make business decisions."

"But we'll split the profits three ways, and I'll take care of Howard," Dan explained.

George turned to Hiro and said, "You can do it if you want to, but I won't." Then he got up and walked toward the bathroom.

Dan leaned across me and said to Hiro, "If you can do this without him, I'm still willing. You can have the 49 percent."

It was a strange situation. Neither Dan nor I realized that George had already walked away from one booking job — when he left Crockett to work for Titan. At

the time I thought George was being unreasonable; it was Dan who was putting up all the money. Looking back, and understanding the business and what a true booker has to go through to make a wrestling company successful, I can now appreciate his stance.

Hiro contemplated Dan's offer, and he said he would let us know. When George returned to the table a few minutes later the two of them headed back to Tampa.

That evening I called George, and he thanked me for trying to put something together. He said that under different circumstances maybe things could have worked out. I called Hiro next, and he had already made up his mind. He would not move forward without George Scott. He too thanked me and said to keep in touch. If one good thing came out of those meetings, it was the start of my friendship with someone who would eventually become a mentor and business partner.

I waited a few days before letting Dan know Hiro's decision, believing his interest would just die off. But like most of us bitten by the wrestling bug, he wouldn't let go. He'd invite me to his house and run ideas by me — on one occasion he even said that he had had his attorney make inquiries into buying the AWA. When he said the price was $5 million I told him he was crazy, even with a contract with ESPN. A few weeks later he said he had been talking to Dusty Rhodes about starting a new company in Florida because Dusty was no longer happy working for Crockett, but he couldn't deal with Dusty's ego, saying that it was a hundred times worse than Mike Graham's and "bigger than the Grand Canyon itself." Although I've never been able to verify his claim since Dusty doesn't remember speaking to anyone named Dan Fisher and Verne drew a blank when I asked him about it, the timing coincides with Verne selling to Jerry Jarrett and Dusty buying into FCW.

It was also on one of these occasions that Dan admitted he had a little wrestling fantasy. He wanted to be a manager named Einstein Moses, who would have the genius of Albert Einstein and the wisdom and compassion of Moses, but be just a little off center. The character would dress in a white robe, wear sandals that he would remove before getting into the ring, carry a staff and don a fake beard and mustache. He thought the gimmick was the greatest thing in the world. He concocted this crazy idea that a religious fanatic would stalk him and shoot him, causing him to have a near-death experience and a revelation. I think he got the assassination idea from *Saturday Night Live* after Eddie Murphy's Buckwheat character was assassinated. Pretty wild thinking for 1989 and way ahead of the November 1996 shotgun angle between Brian Pillman and Steve Austin (which, in my opinion, was one of the most irresponsible storylines in the history of the business).

Dan was a free spirit, to say the least, but he wasn't the only guy who would come up with a really bad manager gimmick. As much as I hate to admit it, I once pitched such an idea myself.

Before Global closed shop, I had the crazy notion that I could be talent. I went to Bob Roop and Dr. Red Roberts with my idea. At the time the GWA had more than a half-dozen African-American wrestlers who were either already working for them or attending their school. They included "Soulman" Alex G., "Ram Man" Johnny Evans, T.J. Jackson, Lord Norman (Norman Smiley), David Perry, the tag team of Death Row and others. My idea was to create a stable of African-American wrestlers called the Brady Bunch under the leadership of yours truly with the gimmick name "Michael Brady." Upon hearing my idea, Roop got up from behind his desk and, without saying a word, walked out of the room, down the hall, out the building, into his car and drove away. Red, who continued to sit at his desk, tried hard to be more tactful.

"Well, Howard," he said with his most professional demeanor, but still being as sarcastic as possible, "While we certainly have a number of African-American wrestlers, I don't think Bob particularly thinks the idea will fly. But we appreciate your enthusiasm."

I learned years later that Bob thought Red had put me up to it as a rib since apparently I wasn't the only person to pitch a goofy idea. Every so often after that, Red would tease me by calling me Mr. Brady.

Maybe I deserved the needling, but not long afterward, the GWA created a rogue group called the Black Wrestling Alliance, which led an invasion of sorts under the guidance of the Reverend James Johnson, a character Red named after Jesse Jackson. They "freed" some of the oppressed African-American wrestlers, such as Death Row. It was actually pretty cutting-edge for its time. While I'm sure neither Bob nor Red would ever admit it, I bet the roots of that concept came from my "Brady Bunch" idea.

Dan's interest in wrestling eventually diminished. I tried to get him to financially back the Wild Women of Wrestling less than a year later, but he begged off. In time we lost touch, and I didn't hear from him again until late 2004 when he responded to a column I wrote for pwinsider.com. After rekindling our friendship after so many years, I was deeply saddened when his eldest daughter, Victoria, sent me an email in January 2005 and said her father had passed away a month earlier at the age of 54.

Not long after the Fisher debacle, Dusty Rhodes bought into FCW, giving them the infusion of cash they needed. They rechristened the promotion the Professional Wrestling Federation (PWF). Dusty had been fired from JCP after the big Starrcade

show because of an on-screen stunt. Road Warrior Animal had pulled a spike out of his shoulder pad and jammed it into in Dusty's eye, enabling him to gig a gusher. Turner had sent the edict down that there would be no juice (blood), and the move triggered an immediate termination. The angle was inspired by one Dusty did in Florida years earlier with Kevin Sullivan, when Sullivan produced the golden spike and drove it into Dusty's chest.

Boris Malenko — whose real name was Larry Simon — had taken a liking to me. For whatever reason, Malenko was always willing to share his experiences and, more importantly, explain the inner workings of the business. Even when I didn't ask questions, he offered candid tidbits that came from his deep love of wrestling. I suppose that was the teacher in him. And while I only stepped into the school's ring with him twice as referee, he became my first true mentor.

While I wouldn't exactly say he took me under his wing, he watered the seeds of interest that had already been planted. I suppose if I had to explain why he did this, I'd have to say it's because he trusted me. "If you give away your business, you don't have a business," he would say. He very much believed in kayfabe and got angry when the boys would tell their friends about what they had learned at his school.

I also think he was fond of me because, like him, I am Jewish. He would talk about Global's Patrick Schaefer and say things like, "With that guy, a *ligner* is a *ganef* and a *ganef* is a *ligner*." *Ligner* being the Yiddish word for "liar," and *ganef* being the Yiddish word for "thief." He was saying "A liar is a thief and a thief is a liar." He had other similar sayings, some I understood and some I didn't.

For me, Malenko was a legendary figure, though I never saw him wrestle while he was in his prime — not even on an old tape. It's unfortunate because I know he had some unbelievable matches with Eddie Graham in the mid-'60s. They did this one angle in 1966 during which Eddie, as the babyface, stepped on and broke Malenko's dentures right in the ring. The next show was sold out, with hundreds of fans turned away. It was good old-fashioned heat. That work-related heat eventually turned into real-life heat and triggered a feud that lasted until Eddie took his life on Super Bowl Sunday 1985.

Graham bought into the Florida territory that was owned by Clarence "Cowboy" Luttrell in 1961 and soon became the Sunshine State's top babyface. As the '60s progressed, both Hiro Matsuda and Duke Keomuka bought into the Florida office, and, as Eddie became more popular, he began getting involved in a lot of civic and community projects. When Malenko arrived in the mid-'60s, Luttrell thought the Russian gimmick would create a natural rivalry for the much

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

The Great Malenko is flanked by his sons, Joe (left) and Dean (right)

loved Graham, especially with the Cuban Missile Crisis still fresh in the minds of many. The two immediately began drawing huge crowds. Luttrell took a liking to Malenko and, according to what Malenko used to tell me, Luttrell was grooming him to eventually be a partner. Malenko, meanwhile, struck up a friendship with Gordon Solie and got into some sort of automotive-based business with him. Solie had a pretty successful track record in Florida and was involved in the stock car circuit.

All was well until Luttrell sold his interest in 1971. Instead of turning it over to Malenko, however, he chose Eddie, who now had majority ownership of the territory. Malenko was unhappy and eventually left Florida for Texas. He would return but not to work for the office. Instead, the Great Malenko ran an opposition group he called the International World Wrestling Alliance (IWWA). This infuriated Eddie, and at one point he wanted Hiro to go to the "outlaw" show and stretch some of their guys. Hiro refused, claiming Malenko was still a friend, even though they hadn't spoken in a long time. I remember Hiro telling me that although he didn't particularly care for the way Malenko ran his wrestling school, he still respected him as a worker. Hiro didn't think it was right for Malenko to take money from just anybody who wanted to learn how to wrestle. Hiro truly had that old school mentality; he was notorious for hurting people who wanted to become a wrestler and scared off more guys than he taught. Still, Hiro respected Malenko and remembered their earlier friendship when they would go to Wolfie Cohen's Rascal House restaurant in Miami Beach for corned beef and other "Jewish delicacies" after matches at the convention center.

As if running opposition to the Florida office wasn't hard enough, Malenko's business venture with Solie went into the tank. I believe it had something to do with an insurance policy, and they did not talk for many, many years. Malenko thought he had been taken to the cleaners, and when he would see that big diamond ring Solie used to wear, he'd say, "There's my investment." They actually buried the hatchet when Solie went to work for Global.

I also got the impression from Malenko that he was bitter over not getting a piece of the Florida territory, although he never came right out and said Eddie

screwed him out of it. I know he did not speak with many of the Florida guys for years, and it was only after the Florida office went out of business that he spoke to any of them again, Duke being the first. Much later, when Malenko was sick and in the hospital, he began to mend fences. Prior to his death in 1994, when it was clear that it was just a matter of time, they eventually all showed up to say their goodbyes.

While Malenko ran opposition, he would frequently get on IWWA television and challenge the Grahams. One time he actually billed the main event at Tampa's Curtis Hickson Hall as himself and his son Joe against Dusty Rhodes and Mike Graham — "if they would show up." Malenko used to tell a story about how one time he was working with Dusty and Dusty wasn't selling for him, so he got him down on the mat and held him there for several minutes until he agreed to sell for him. If that's true, and there's no reason to believe otherwise, no wonder Dusty and Mike never showed up! But even with all the TV hype, only seven people bought tickets. Not 7,000 people. Not 700 people. Not even 70 people. Seven! It wasn't long before the IWWA was out of business.

Later, after the Global Wrestling Alliance bellied up and Malenko went back to running his own school — instead of running it in conjunction with the GWA — he resurrected the IWWA name and ran his school shows under that banner.

While Malenko was unknowingly mentoring me, Phyllis Lee, his right-hand person, was also being very helpful. Phyllis was a sweetheart of a lady who would do anything for the boys, whether they asked her to or not. After Malenko passed away, Phyllis made quite a name for herself as an MMA fight manager, earning the nickname "The First Lady of MMA." For many years I didn't know what to make of her relationship with Malenko. Was she his girlfriend? Was she his mistress? Maybe she was a glorified arena rat? One time Cora Combs asked her, "What do you do for Larry?" and Phyllis responded, "Everything!"

Whatever she was, it didn't really matter to me because she had a good heart. Some of the boys were very mean, however, and while they would never dare say anything to her face, they would make snide remarks behind her back. Phyllis suffered from osteoporosis, a condition in which the density of one's bones decrease, and scoliosis, a condition that caused her spine to curve from side to side. To the layman it looked as if she had a hump on her back, and while she dressed as best she could to hide it, it was still obvious she had some kind of medical condition. Some of the boys, being the overgrown children they were, said spiteful things, like if she ever decided to wrestle, she should use a hunchback gimmick because she could never have her shoulders pinned to the mat. Craig and I were always very respectful of Phyllis, and when we launched our wrestling company later that year,

COURTESY PHYLLIS LEE

Phyllis Lee poses with MMA fighter Yuki Kondo in Yokohama, Japan

Phyllis was an enormous help, identifying and booking talent.

Before long it was time for another Tampa road trip, except this time we were on a mission. Aside from going up to see the PWF's Flamingo Madness show, in which Dusty would square off with the Big Steel Man (Fred Ottman, who would go on to have a successful career in the WWF as Tugboat), we wanted to sit down with Malenko to pick his brain and get some ideas. Craig and I were now on the path toward running our own shows.

We sat with Malenko and Phyllis for three hours, asking a million questions and taking notes. We were fortunate to be able to leverage Malenko's years of experience, and they never asked for anything in return.

After the meeting we headed over to the arena for the Flamingo Madness show, and, being early, we could see them preparing for the television shoot, adjusting the camera angles and lighting. At one point Gordon was watching the monitors and commented to Dusty that he didn't like the way the ring looked on camera because of all the scratches. Before Dusty could answer him, Gordon took a can of spray paint and, hobbling down to ringside, touched up some of the more visible marks. I remember Dusty standing back with a group of people commenting that Gordon was worried about the wrong thing.

As bell time approached, I saw Patrick Schaefer, the former head of Global. As I was watching the show from the side, he came up and said hello, handing me a new business card. He was now the president of a company called Blackstar, which specialized in international syndication and distribution. Patrick had cut a deal to distribute PWF tapes overseas. Although Malenko's words about him always resonated, Patrick had a knack for finding investors and raising money, all through over-the-counter penny-stock deals. I don't know how he did it, but he was the type of guy who could roll around in crap for years and not get dirty. He was involved with two roller derby projects, the first called the World Roller Foundation, which later changed its name to the RollerSport Challenge, and the

World Roller Alliance, which he owned under the brand Globe Warriors, which he planned to take public in 2002 by filing an application with the Securities and Exchange Commission to issue 700,000 shares of common stock in an attempt to raise $60 million. When that failed, he became the chief executive officer of a group called Reality Racing trading over-the-counter on Pink Sheets as RRGI and unofficially billed as NASCAR meets *American Idol*. At the end of April 2008, the stock was still being traded and at one point had reached a 52-week high of 28 cents per share. There were approximately 166,900 shares of RRGI actively trading at a rate of $0.009 per share.

I got my taste of Dusty's PWF, and I was not impressed. Not long after Flamingo Madness, the PWF had a show scheduled for the James L. Knight Center in Miami — the same building the WWF had run a few years earlier. Gordon called and asked me to do some last-minute publicity to help them because their ticket sales were pretty soft. Since I was pretty plugged into the Miami publicity machine, having worked all the contacts for SpyTech, I called in some favors around town, pulled some strings and had Dusty on a half a dozen radio stations the day of the show to promote it. The night of the show I was invited backstage by Gordon to finally meet the Dream face-to-face.

My very first encounter with Stardust was in West Palm Beach sometime in 1987. Crockett was running a pre-Starrcade tour, and I was at the back of the arena, near the wrestlers' entranceway. Dusty came out and looked around the crowd to see what the attendance was. I said, "Hey, how are you?" He ignored me and went back inside the locker room.

Then a fan came up and asked the security guard, "Is Dusty Rhodes eating?"

"What?" the security guard asked.

"Is he eating? He must be eating, 'cause he looks so fat."

A smile quickly came to my face.

About six months later, Crockett did a show in Miami at the James L. Knight Center. It was the very first Wednesday night live broadcast on TBS, called Miami Mayhem. Danny Miller, who was the event coordinator for the show and had allowed me full access as a photographer, told me to stay off the third floor, where the dressing rooms were. Crockett, the TV production people and all the bigwigs would be all over the place, and I'd end up getting in someone's way, he said.

Toward the end of the show I took the backstage elevator from the fourth floor, where the arena was, and pressed 1. The elevator made an unscheduled stop at 3. The doors opened, and there was Danny, straight ahead. To his right was Dusty, and to his left was Crockett, and the two of them were screaming at each other. And there I was, right smack in the middle of it. The two of them looked at me,

and all I could say was "Hey, how you doing?" I pressed 1 again, the doors closed and I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

That was a year-and-a-half before this particular night, and I was psyched because Gordon had told me that Dusty wanted to personally thank me for helping out. Suddenly Dusty made his appearance from the stairwell.

"Hello Dusty, how are you?" I said, extending my hand.

He walked right past me, looked into the arena to see how the crowd was, then turned around, walked past me a second time and went back downstairs to the third floor. He didn't even acknowledge me. I was pissed off. I called Gordon the next day, and it felt like the Mike Graham and Dan Fisher fiasco all over again. However, I did learn that night — from talking to Dusty's front man Randy Roberts, who was one of his investors — that Dusty would soon be heading to the WWF.

The Bull of the Woods. Ulvalde Slim. The Midnight Rider. Virgil Reily Runnels Jr. The Son of a Plumber. The American Dream. The Common Man. No matter what you call him, Dusty Rhodes remains one of the most charismatic personalities to ever grace our business. How many people in this business can claim to have a series of match endings named after him? The so-called Dusty Finish. Without a doubt, Dusty is the most imitated man in wrestling dressing rooms, although some would argue Hulk Hogan is right up there, brother. The mere mention of his name brings a lisping imitation, if you weeeelll.

I wouldn't cross paths with Rhodes again until 1998, when I called to invite him to the NWA's 50th anniversary celebration in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. He finally spoke to me — but I was promptly turned down. We didn't speak again until 2000, when I began running shows at the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory in Tampa, the building that he used to book and that many people believe he built. I contacted him to work with me, and he said no. He felt I would fail miserably, and eventually he would just walk into the building himself to take it over. He was wrong. But, hell, at least he was honest about his intentions. I got the upturned nose from the obnoxious, egomaniacal American Dream.

There was a positive experience that came out of that Miami show at the Knight Center, however. Penelope Paradise, who Craig and I knew from Malenko's school, was booked to wrestle Wendi Richter. Penelope introduced us to Luna Vachon, who was there because her then live-in boyfriend, Dick Slater, was also on the card. We found out that Luna and Slater lived locally, in Pompano Beach. Craig and I had already begun to plan our women's wrestling promotion and when we were left alone for a few minutes we tried to come up with a way to get Luna involved.

"Why don't we ask her to be our booker?" I suggested.

"That's a great idea," was Craig's response.

He immediately moved forward and spoke to Luna about the prospect. Before the end of the night, she was on board.

The only problem was how to tell Phyllis that she was not the booker — we'd led her to believe she would be. Craig and I decided to cross that bridge at a later date. Although Craig had already started the process, we hadn't even planned our first show. Craig still had plenty of corporate details to work out. Since I had no money to invest, it was going to be Craig's company, and I would get a share of any money made based on sweat equity. Since he was my best friend, we never needed paperwork — our words were our bond.

With pretty much everything in line, we went back to Tampa to finalize things with Malenko and Phyllis.

As usual we got into Tampa on Friday night, but instead of doing the strip club rounds, Craig and I spent the evening going over our plan and meeting up with Danny Miller to get his advice. Danny was the veteran promoter in Florida, and if we couldn't learn something from him, we couldn't learn anything from anyone.

The next morning we learned from the good professor that the school would be running one of their local shows that afternoon at an auto dealership in the city of Lake Wales, about an hour away. We would finally get to see a Malenko show firsthand, and it would give us a great opportunity to see how things operated on a small scale.

After each match there would be a 10- to 15-minute break to give the car salesmen a chance to mingle with the crowd. The afternoon was supposed to be about selling cars, not wrestling. For the dealership, wrestling was just a way to get potential patrons onto the lot, but one glance at the crowd and you knew they didn't give a damn about the autos; they wanted to see bodyslams and dropkicks. Like every true indie show, it was filled with young men and women who were chasing their dream. Because we had seen these same workers practicing at the school earlier in the day, it was interesting to watch them polish their ring skills in front of a live audience.

Like most sold shows, Malenko made a deal with the auto dealership to get a deposit up front and the balance of his money at the end. He was responsible for delivering six matches, but between the fourth and fifth match dark clouds rolled in, and just after the fifth match concluded, the skies opened up with heavy rain. While probably 99 percent of promoters would have called it a day, the auto dealer wasn't letting Malenko off the hook, and if he wanted to be paid his balance the last match had to go on. So in the makeshift locker room, when Malenko explained what was going on, a couple of volunteers stepped forward to ensure the show would be complete.

The last match of the day ended up being a mixed tag team bout with two of

the male workers going up against a male and female team . . . during a heavy thunderstorm. As the fans watched the match through the showroom windows, the wrestlers looked like they were having a blast. It was like watching four kids at a water park. I don't even recall if they had a referee with them or not. The match ended, and the four wrestlers came inside to a round of applause, their faces still beaming from the fun. Malenko and Phyllis hugged each of them as they came through the glass door.

In hindsight it was a stupid move for the workers, the auto dealer and Malenko himself. One of the workers could have got hurt or struck by lightning. But from the inside looking out, this was indie wrestling in its purest form and a step up from today's backyard wrestling because the workers did it for the love of it. I looked at their faces, and the smiles told the story. It was really no different from when I was a kid playing touch football in Brooklyn with my friends — we played whether it was raining, snowing, sleeting, and we always had fun.

If Craig and I were to have half the fun that those four wrestlers had out in that rainstorm, we were going to be in for one hell of a time.

I only recall two of the wrestlers who worked in that downpour. One was a worker by the name of Mary Ray, the Biker Babe. She was a short, kind of stocky gal with short yellow hair, a chipped tooth and a redneck personality. The other was this young, lanky kid with no muscle definition and semi-short, curly hair. Although he was only 17 at the time, he looked more like a 14-year-old, especially when he grinned from ear to ear. The kid would go on to have a stellar career under a variety of names — the Lightning Kid, the 1-2-3 Kid, Syxx, 6-Pac and X-Pac among them. Of course, "the kid" was none other than future WWF, WCW and TNA star Sean Waltman.

After the show, Malenko and Phyllis took all the wrestlers out to Pizza Hut on the way back to Tampa. Craig and I sat off to the side taking everything in, watching the group bond as a family.

"Are you ready?" Craig asked. I knew exactly what he meant.

I had made the jump from fan to being on the fringe of the business, and now I was about to make the jump that would take me directly inside. Even though I thought I had learned much already, it was nothing compared to what was yet to come.

"I'm ready," I told Craig. "I'm ready!"

The only limit of our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.
— Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945)

SIX

WOW! NO, WWOW!

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

Former WWF ladies champion Wendi Richter joins WWOW

Now, we go to school!
— Ric Flair (1949–)

No matter how much you think you know about the wrestling business and the people in it, you can really never know it all — it's in a constant state of flux. It's a business driven by individual agendas and filled with supercharged egos. Trying to learn everything about it is like to taking a three-dimensional snapshot of an exploding egg and examining it from every direction all at once.

Think of it this way . . . if you did take that 3-D photo, while it may seem as

though you can see everything, when you look at it straight on, you wouldn't be able to see the hidden pieces of shell on the other side of the exploding yolk. And if you turn the picture around and look at it from the other direction, you would still be missing things hidden by something else. Instead, you learn a little bit at a time, and the more directions you look in, the better you grasp the entirety.

The wrestling business is like an exploding egg. You may get a great picture from one perspective, but you can never truly see the entire picture. Never.

While Craig Cohen and I were poised to begin promoting our own shows, I couldn't quite see the whole picture. Instead of trying to help establish our own brand, I continued pining for an established wrestling company.

Around the time that Dusty Rhodes bought into Florida Championship Wrestling and changed the name to the Pro Wrestling Federation, George Scott was hired as WCW's new booker. George took Hiro Matsuda with him. Hiro — who had a run at WCW as Lex Luger's manager when Dusty was booking and had been engaged in a feud in which he, as the Master of the Japanese Sleeper, faced off with Johnny Weaver and his Weaver Lock — now found himself in a gimmick as the manager of Keiji Mutoh (the Great Muta) and then as Ric Flair's manager, involved with both Terry Funk and "Playboy" Gary Hart's J-Tex Corporation, portraying their business agent from Japan.

My two new friends were on a grand stage, and one of them was in a position of power; I was not shy about asking George for help. Although I had become closer with Hiro than with George, I came right out and asked the NWA's new booker to see if he could get me a job with Crockett. Without hesitation, George Scott began making inquiries for me.

George had tried to get me a public relations or publicity position, but before anything of substance could materialize, Jim Crockett Promotions was sold to Turner Broadcasting, and George was replaced by Ole Anderson. Hiro quickly found himself on the outs too, but with some quick maneuvering he got himself a great position with New Japan Pro Wrestling as their liaison to World Championship Wrestling. Hiro had put his long-term relationships with Antonio Inoki and Masa Saito to good use.

With the prospect of working for WCW no longer an option, I focused on the promotion with Craig, even though I still had visions of grandeur dancing in my head.

I was faced with another problem too: SpyTech had decided to move its base of operations from Miami to New York and without an offer for a cost of living adjustment to make the move worth my while, I found myself without a job. While Ed Sklar didn't want to give me any severance, Dave Matluck stepped

forward and ensured I would get one month's pay. After my severance ran out, my two oldest brothers, Arnie and Marty, came to the rescue and offered me a job at their new travel agency, National Casino Tours. While I happily accepted the work, my heart was elsewhere. In my mind it was going to be a temporary position; I was determined to make it in wrestling.

When Craig and I started the promotion, although we considered ourselves partners and did everything on a handshake, the reality was that I was working for him. Craig had already established himself as a successful Miami businessman — he and his family owned a handful of gift shops called Metal Crafter in four of the local malls. Craig had a great sense for business; he knew how to balance quality with quantity and knew when to be frugal and when not to be.

Since I didn't have a proverbial pot to piss in at this point, still on the rebound from bankruptcy, it was Craig who put up all the money to get the company started — everything from creating the corporation and setting up the post office box to producing the ancillary materials we needed, like flyers, posters and even T-shirts. This was really his baby, and I was just along for the ride.

So what were we going to call this new promotion?

We had already decided to do a women's promotion since it would be different from what some of the people we were friendly with were doing, and we didn't want to be perceived as being new competition. We began tossing around names. I felt we needed something with a little oomph and lightheartedly suggested Beautiful Ladies of Wrestling. Craig didn't think a group of female wrestlers called BLOW was a very good idea, especially if we wanted to do school fundraisers. Since GLOW (Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling) had been enormously popular during the mid-'80s and POWW (Powerful Women of Wrestling) had reached limited popularity in the late '80s, Craig suggested we simply call the promotion WOW, for Women of Wrestling. As a joke I tried imitating Luke and Butch of the Bushwhackers by changing the emphasis on the letter "O" to make the "wow" sound more like "glow" and I grunted out an exaggerated "Wwwwwhooooa!" Thinking this was funny, we tried coming up with an appropriate word that started with the letter "W" to precede the letters W-O-W. With apologies to the late Walt Disney, we actually considered calling our promotion the Wonderful Women of Wrestling before settling on Wild.

Almost immediately after we created WWOW we had to protect our brand name. Our threats of lawsuits were commonplace; one company was offering apartment wrestling videos under the title *Wild Women of Wrestling*, and there was even a company in Fort Lauderdale that offered topless car washes from the "Wild Women of Wrestling." We successfully stopped every usage and even got the topless car wash

company to pay us $1,000 to be a sponsor of one of our events. It wasn't until Craig let his ownership of the WWOW name go into default in the late '90s that David McLane, the creator of both GLOW and POWW, launched the new WOW in 2000, which lasted only one television season.

While Craig never said anything to me about it, I think many of the people who he knew from wrestling before I started attending the matches — Bruce Owens, Dana Taylor and others — really couldn't understand why I had become his business partner and they hadn't. Perhaps if they had paid more attention, they would have understood that it was simply a natural progression of our friendship. A lot of people around at the time misunderstood the business relationship Craig and I had. Some people, like Luna Vachon's ex-live-in boyfriend Dick Slater, went as far as to chalk it up to a different kind of *buddy* relationship.

Aside from the fact that we became best friends in a relatively short period of time, in many ways Craig and I were, as he used to say, twin brothers from separate mothers. We both grew up in the Northeast (he was from Philadelphia, while I was from Brooklyn), we followed the same wrestlers growing up, we both came from strong Jewish households where family came first, we both made similar transitions from being wrestling fans to working on the fringe of the business and we both had a strong desire to do something more meaningful in the business than what we were doing. While we could both be funny and frivolous, when it came time to be serious about promoting, we were both very focused and determined to be successful. The others just did not have that same drive.

Even before our first show, I already had the notion of doing television, so I called the television syndication company MG/Perin. Based in New York, they were the same company that had syndicated and distributed GLOW a few years earlier. Within a few minutes of talking to the president of the company, Richard Perin, I knew I was wasting my time. Perin told me that to get women's wrestling on the air, stations would have to be compensated $50,000 a year or more, plus, as the company doing the syndication, they wouldn't be interested in handling the show unless they were paid $10,000 in advance to handle station clearance, and it would still be up to me to sell the advertising, of which they wanted 50 percent.

After hearing that I immediately began calling my wrestling contacts and asking them everything and anything they knew about TV production, getting on the air and how to make money doing it. I knew that the scenario Richard Perin put before me couldn't be the only answer — there had to be a way to do this without it costing a small fortune. I figured it couldn't be any harder than doing radio syndication, but since I had failed at that . . . how we were going to pay for it was a different issue, and one Craig and I spoke about frequently.

While Roy Nelson, Gordon Solie, Hiro Matsuda, George Scott, Bob Roop, Red Roberts and Patrick Schaefer all provided great insight into what it would take to produce a show and get it on the air, I left no stone unturned and reached outside the wrestling business to see what else I could find out about syndicating a new wrestling show. Learning fairly quickly that, like radio syndication, once a show was on the air you needed advertisers to generate income and offset the production cost, I began looking for a company that could do just that.

Aside from contacting television production and syndication companies, l called a longtime friend of my sister Terri who had garnered some serious stroke over the years with the Madison Avenue advertising elite. Lee Francis provided a lot of clarity about what I could expect from potential sponsors, but she really didn't have the contacts to put me on the right track. I contacted my father's younger brother Sam, who also knew several Madison Avenue power brokers. Having worked with some of the best commercial photographers and creative people in the world, my uncle put me in touch with several people who were in the know, and they offered terrific insights and, more importantly, leads. I was closing in on my new goal, but there were still a few pieces to the puzzle missing.

One of the people my uncle put me in touch with was Len Koch, who owned a company called Syndicast. Koch was a television syndication veteran whose many accomplishments included the creation and syndication of such television shows as *The Mike Douglas Show*, *The Sammy Davis Jr. Show* and *The Dinah Shore Show*. Considering Syndicast was instrumental in the development of the barter syndication business in the U.S., if any company could help it would be them. When I called on Len to set up a meeting at his New York office, he was more than cordial.

After going to New York and having a brief meeting with Len, he walked me into the office of one of his top reps, someone who specialized in advertising time sales. The guy's name was Bob Syers. Bob had cut his teeth in radio, where he worked for ABC. He had also helped develop programming for Lifetime Television when the network was in its infancy and called Daytime. He did similar work for the Arts and Entertainment network now known as A&E.

Perhaps it was fate that Bob Syers and I would meet because four years later he would help Hiro and I get our foot in the door with international broadcasters. There was no doubt Bob was destined to be involved in pro wrestling, whether he worked on my project or not. While still working for Syndicast, he began syndicating Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Association show during their twilight, and when he left Syndicast to start RJS Marketing, he took Verne and the AWA with him. Bob would later be responsible for creating his own ladies wrestling group called FLAIR, which stood for Fantastic Ladies Appearing in the International Ring.

While Bob admits today he used the name FLAIR to take advantage of then NWA World Champion Ric Flair's popularity, Patrick Schaefer (who went to work for Bob after he left Blackstar) filled in the words to make the acronym work. RJS Marketing also ended up syndicating and brokering the advertising time for *Pro Wrestling This Week*, hosted by Gordon Solie and Joe Pedicino.

Because Len was a longtime friend of my uncle, neither he nor Bob pulled any punches when telling me what could be accomplished, and I left New York realizing I had found the perfect company, which could both syndicate the show and set up sponsors to buy advertising time. But like MG/Perin, it was going to cost money — not nearly as much as what Richard Perin was asking for, but it was still going to cost some serious coin. Luckily, Len and Bob had agreed to take the majority of their fee on the back end, after the show was cleared and advertising was sold. Since both knew I was putting a budget and business plan together to raise money, they worked with me to crunch numbers.

As reassurance to the Syndicast plan, I also worked out a deal with an advertising buyer by the name of Michael Predmest from Tri-Way Media and Communications, based out of Boca Raton. Mike was a friend of a friend and had been in radio and television advertising for more than 20 years. Unlike Syndicast, who would represent me in selling time, Predmest represented the buyers and would buy time from me on behalf of his clients. He too helped me crunch the numbers and explained how the revenue stream would work. Based on certain criteria, he helped me create the projections we needed for a working business plan.

In order to maximize potential returns, I even worked out a deal with Patrick Schaefer to have his company, Blackstar, handle international distribution. Like the others, he produced a projection sheet to illustrate potential income based on his experience in the marketplace and what similar programming sold for overseas.

Now that I had done my homework, Craig was more at ease with the idea of us doing television, although I think he still felt we were biting off more than we could chew. But, like me, he was determined to make the project work. All we needed was a production company to shoot and edit our pilot.

While Hiro suggested we speak to F&F Productions out of Tampa, which had done much of the production work for Championship Wrestling from Florida and were experts at producing sports programming, including pro wrestling, Bob Roop and Red Roberts suggested we speak to the company they used when producing the GWA, Pompano-based Media Productions. After meeting with both companies and weighing our options, Media was more accommodating and offered a variety of flexible options, including the ability to use their soundstage and do an in-studio shoot. However, because the standards of television wrestling had been

reestablished by the WWF and WCW and their multi-camera, high-end productions, there was no way a studio wrestling show could work nationally. We needed an arena-based event in order to get a decent station lineup and international licensing agreements; it's still true today, 20 years later.

We still hadn't promoted show one, but that was about to change. With Luna as our booker (although matchmaker and finish-caller would be a more appropriate title), Phyllis Lee all set to get us talent and all the paperwork in place, we were now ready to sell our first wrestling show. One of the wrestlers we had planned to use, Denise Klimowicz (who wrestled at the time as Dazzling Denise but would eventually work under the ring name Ariel Dee), suggested to Luna that we try to sell a show to a club she frequented, J.J.'s Other Side Lounge. J.J.'s was billed as a place "For Women and Friends." Simply put, J.J.'s was a lesbian bar.

After Denise set up a meeting for us, Craig and I walked into this lesbian bar to sell the owner on the idea of a ladies' wrestling show. And while that might sound like the setup for a very bad joke, we were one hundred percent serious when we walked in, and when we walked out of there 45 minutes later we had our first signed contract. Despite our reserve when we walked out of the establishment with a deposit check, once we got back to Craig's car, it was high-five central. In our minds this would be the first of many WWOW shows — we felt there was nothing to it. You walk in, you make your pitch by laying out your plans, you tell them how much you want and you say, "Sign here." Boy, were we naive!

However, in the meantime, we were riding this unbelievable high. Not only were we less than a month away from doing our first show, but we were preparing for a huge undertaking in producing television. What were we thinking?

Since Media Productions was local and had produced a year's worth of wrestling for Global, we were set to go with them until another company came into the picture with an opportunity we just couldn't ignore. In another one of those friend-of-a-friend introductions, we found ourselves talking turkey with Mizlou TV Sports, one of the premier sports production and syndication companies of the time.

Unlike the traditional networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, Mizlou produced and distributed sports programming to a network of "affiliates" that were set up on an event-by-event basis. Mizlou's TV network leveraged affiliates of all three major networks plus independent television stations and, later, regional sports networks.

In the era preceding satellite television distribution, aside from the major networks, Mizlou had the only system capable of distributing programming to television stations that used a nationwide system of landlines and microwave towers. Mizlou covered more college football bowl games than any other network of its era and also covered college basketball, the North American Soccer League,

Arena Football League games, professional boxing events and LPGA golf. During the '80s Mizlou gave NASCAR its first regular national television coverage, and they were also the first to distribute the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association events. In a nonsports capacity, Mizlou used their infrastructure to help distribute events like the annual Jerry Lewis MDA labor day telethon.

While we certainly didn't want to be distracted from our upcoming first show, there was no denying that our thoughts were elsewhere — well, mine were — as we now had a legitimate player and potential broadcast partner sitting at the table with us. We were in a make or break scenario. On July 14th, I spoke with Mizlou's president, Bill Schwing, but after hanging up I still wasn't sure where we stood. Was this going to be another in the long line of disappointments?

On July 25th, we got our answer.

In a fax addressed to me, Don Friedman, Mizlou's vice president of marketing and program development, wrote:

> Dear Howard:
>
> As per your conversation with Bill Schwing on Friday, July 14, 1989, this letter will affirm that Mizlou TV Sports would consider syndicating the Wild Women of Wrestling program.
>
> Of course that is contingent on the initial four shows meeting the expectations of being the high quality show which you described.
>
> When you are ready we will be happy to present a specific proposal for Mizlou's production/syndication services.
>
> In the meantime we look forward to hearing about your progress in getting this timely, popular, and entertaining sports program ready for television.
>
> Sincerely,
> Don Friedman
> V.P. Marketing/Program Development

All things considered, this came about in a relatively short period of time, and while you always hope for the best, I was actually expecting the door to be slammed in my face. All we had to do now was get our first show under our belt, and then we could concentrate on producing a television show.

On Sunday afternoon, August 6, 1989, the Wild Women of Wrestling made its debut, and I took one more step forward and was officially "in the business." I

might have still been a bit of a mark, but from this day forward, nobody could ever take away the fact that we ran our very own wrestling show.

Although Luna was our booker — she would have wrestled too but was on crutches at the time, recovering from knee surgery — and Phyllis would help get the girls for our first show, Craig and I were determined to put our own creative stamp on the product now that we were starting to think about television. We both believed that, in order to hide some of the shortcomings of the workers, we needed to create distractions and confusion, sort of how a magician uses misdirection to make his illusions more believable. For us, it was giving every worker a gimmick and pairing the more experienced girls with those who were greener. We even created a manager and named him Famous Amos, after the king of chocolate chip cookies. William Blue, who frequently drove some of the out of town wrestlers around South Florida when they came to town, took on the gimmick and made it work. It worked so well that he generated a ton of heat from the crowd, and at one point they stole his bag of chocolate chip cookies and began passing it around among themselves.

Because the club had a low ceiling, the event was held in their parking lot. Unfortunately, before the eight-girl over-the-top-rope battle royal main event could take place, the local police showed up and shut us down. While they claimed the club had failed to get the proper permit to hold the outside event, I think it had nothing to do with getting a permit and everything to do with the lifestyle of the owners and their patrons. There's no doubt in my mind that if J.J.'s had been any other type of establishment, the show would have continued without a hitch. We moved inside — and that's when it got really interesting.

One of our referees, Joe Popejoy, insisted that a female patron was hitting on him between the matches, not realizing she was actually a transvestite, and Phyllis was visibly upset about being usurped by Luna in calling the finishes. Craig and I wanted both of them involved, but we knew it was going to be a challenge. Aside from putting up with Phyllis's bruised ego, several of the local male wrestlers had showed up to gawk, which made most of the people in the dressing room a bit uneasy. Some of the boys were there to help Rusty Brooks with the ring, but others showed up unannounced and uninvited.

One of the workers who showed up was somebody I would become very friendly with a few years later — Steve Collins (real name Wylie Sacks), whose moniker at the time was the Party Animal. Steve was visibly drunk throughout the afternoon, and he hadn't come to the show alone. He brought his then girlfriend Liza with him, a big, buxom blonde who worked as a stripper.

Craig, Luna, Penelope Paradise and I were huddled in a corner of the dressing

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

"Stiff Collins" works over another opponent

room trying to figure out how we were going to pull off the eight-girl match on a dance floor with no ring, including a finish that made sense, when all of a sudden Luna had an astonished look on her face. Penelope, who would marry Steve several years later and was looking in the same direction as Luna, gasped in horror.

Craig turned to look over his shoulder, "Jesus Christ!" he said.

I was the last of the foursome to look, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Steve had a can of Bud in one hand, his girlfriend's curly blonde hair clenched in the other, his pants down around his knees and Liza's face planted squarely in his crotch performing oral favors on him.

We were all stunned, but after the initial shock wore off, we just shook our heads in disbelief. Instead of getting all bent out of shape about it, since that would have made an even bigger stink, we simply moved several feet away from them and finished our business while they finished theirs.

Welcome, Mr. Brody, to the truly bizarre everything goes world of professional wrestling. For years after that little episode I called Wylie "Stiff Collins" instead of "Steve Collins," and while he may have thought I was referring to his work in the ring, I was actually referring to his work in the dressing room.

As the show wrapped up, with Denise winning a dance floor pile-on free-for-all that looked more like an all-girl orgy than a battle royal, we collected the balance of our money and began packing up. When the crowd wanted more, the owner of J.J.'s ended up hiring Steve's girlfriend to dance topless. To say she too was a hit would be an understatement, especially after she licked her nipples and stuck the dollar bills that patrons gave her to them. She had the best payoff of the night. And unlike the rest of us, she booked several return engagements to J.J.'s.

We shouldn't have been shocked because, even in wrestling, sex sells. And when you get right down to it, wasn't that what we were doing too? It didn't matter that this particular crowd was gay women as it could very easily have been hooting and hollering men. In its rawest form, wwow was all about selling the appeal of lady

wrestlers, even though some of them were about as far removed from sexy as one can get.

With our first WWOW show complete, Craig and I felt as if we'd just promoted *WrestleMania*. But despite all the little problems, all the personalities, all the little things that went wrong with the show, the good stuff far outweighed the bad, and we were ready to conquer the world.

With one little show before a crowd of about 150 in the hopper, we were now going to focus our attention on television. Talk about biting off more than you can chew. We were barely taking baby steps, and I wanted to run the Boston Marathon. Being the persistent booger I was, I got Craig excited about the concept too, and while we should have been concentrating on getting more sold shows, I wanted to be Cecil B. DeMille or, at the very least, Vince McMahon. If I thought I was hooked before, I now had a full blown case of *acute wrestleitis*, a condition in which a wrestling promoter's head swells so big, that it not only creates a false sense of accomplishment, but it impairs his vision to the point that he can only see the positive in a situation.

A few days after the show I was on the phone again with Mizlou, outlining what we were looking for in the way of television production. Simply put, we wanted our brand to have a look and feel similar to what the WWF was presenting at the time. A few days after our conversation, Don Friedman faxed me a detailed proposal that not only included a breakdown of production equipment, services and costs but a list of station affiliates they had cleared for arena football and boxing, to give us an idea of what we could expect as a projected syndicated station lineup. The price tag was $49,000 for the first four one-hour episodes.

Now that we knew what it was going to cost production-wise, we had to start putting a budget together for all the other costs associated with shooting television: arena rental, advertising, talent, transportation, hotel accommodations and overhead. It was going to take about $65,000 to pull it off.

The first person I called was Dan Fisher, the guy who had been willing to put money behind Gordon, Steve Keirn and Mike Graham until Mike asked for $2 million, but he was already waist deep in a new project and didn't want to invest in ladies' wrestling, no matter how small the investment was. I also went to my two older brothers to see if they would be willing to put the money up, but Arnie had his finances tied up in his ongoing chemical sales business, and Marty had all his money wrapped up in the travel agency. While Craig was willing to put up some of the money himself, he knew he couldn't do it on his own, so he decided to go to the one and only person he could trust — his father.

It wasn't as though I didn't know Bob Cohen, having broken bread several times

at his home, but this was different. Craig arranged for him and me to meet his father over dinner at a little deli by his parent's house. Craig told me ahead of time to let him do the talking since I had no money to put into the project and he knew the first thing his father was going to ask was about the finances. After sitting down and making small talk, Bob pointedly asked how much it was going to cost and how much I was going to put in.

"About 60 or 65 thousand," Craig answered.

"And how much are you putting in?" Bob asked me.

Craig answered for me by flashing the goose egg sign with his hand.

I could tell Bob wasn't exactly thrilled with the arrangement, but Craig explained as best he could that the only thing I was bringing to the table was my desire to make the project successful. I don't think Bob thought that was a very even trade.

Bob thought for a long time and finally asked his son if he realized he couldn't go into a $65,000 project with $65,000 and that it would cost much more. Craig said he understood and then told his father about another friend who would most likely put some money into the project.

Dan Druckman was an associate of Craig's who represented one of the gift lines that Craig bought for his store, so Bob knew him too. Like us, Dan was a young and ambitious guy. He differed from us in that his father was a Miami power attorney who was well connected in business and political circles. Dan had that certain aura about him; you just knew that no matter what type of project you would put in front of him, he would help it succeed because of his resilience and his resources. Craig knew from talking with Dan that even if he didn't put the money up himself, he knew people who not only could but would.

Bob, unfortunately, didn't like the sound of that.

"How do you know who these people are?" Bob asked. "How do you know that if things don't work out, one of them isn't going to make trouble?"

We couldn't answer.

Bob suggested that before Craig commit, he look at every aspect of what he was willing to do. Without coming right out and saying it, Bob was telling his son that he trusted his business sense and that, if he needed the money to do the project, he would provide the financing. We had the green light we were looking for.

Almost immediately Craig and I divided the workload and set off to see if we could put together a television show. Craig would handle the live event and all the intricacies that went along with it, while I would handle the production end, working with Mizlou, Bob Syers and Mike Predmest. Together we would work with Luna on a strategy for talent, and one of the things we wanted to do was

crown an undisputed world women's champion. Our idea was to have Wendi Richter, who was no longer working for the WWF and was perhaps the most well-known lady wrestler of the time, face off against Misty Blue Simmes, who was the then NWA United States women champion (having replaced Debbie Combs), since the title was being phased out at the time and she was not being booked.

We set a date of Thursday, November 2, 1989, to shoot. In the middle of making arrangements, we got a call from Mizlou saying something to the effect that before they would finalize and sign a contract with us, they wanted to meet face-to-face to go over the details. While we suggested we could accomplish this through faxes and phone calls, Don Friedman insisted we do it in person. And so, during the third week of August, Craig and I put everything on hold for a New York sit-down with them.

While it was exciting to be meeting at their offices, we really couldn't understand why the deal couldn't be finalized by phone and fax. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't impressed when we got there. Don gave us the nickel tour, which included meeting some of the people who we would be working with as well as showing us the studio where their new 24-hour Mizlou Sports News Network originated from. SNN was the first network of its kind to deliver sports news in a CNN-news format. Every 24 hours they would produce six hours of original programming.

When it came time to talk business, Don took us out to lunch. Lunch was a lot of chitchat about Craig's background as well as mine, and then we went back to Don's office to "go over details." After a few words setting up what he was about to spring on us, Don handed us a preliminary station lineup of where our show would be seen beginning January 1, 1990. It wasn't the same list he'd shown me previously. That was an estimated station lineup — this was a list of actual stations that had committed to carrying the program sight unseen due to Mizlou's reputation for delivering quality sports programming. To say it was impressive would be a drastic understatement. Not only did it include television stations in 14 of the top 15 markets — including outlets in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago — but the combination of broadcast stations and regional sports networks delivered coverage to 85 percent of all U.S. households, more than enough to secure corporate sponsors and advertisers. It seems Mizlou wasn't going to commit to the project unless they knew for certain that the station clearance would guarantee success.

Once this was explained, Don finally admitted that the meeting had nothing to do with "going over details." It was all about achieving a level of comfort. They wanted to know who they were about to get into bed with, and part of Don's job was to measure us up before they made a final commitment. Now that he knew we were for real, we were on target to make WWOW TV a reality.

But you know the old axiom, if something sounds too good to be true it usually is? Before our contract with Mizlou could be finalized and signed, we hit a snag — one of overwhelming proportions.

Mizlou had launched SNN several months earlier and had sought $15 to $20 million in private funding in order to keep the network on the air and to move forward with their committed projects. After months of looking for a bailout, SNN conceded defeat. By the end of August, their parent company, Mizlou Communications Corporation, which also owned Mizlou TV Sports, began the process of filing for bankruptcy protection.

The news was nothing short of devastating. It meant we had to start from square one. Although the company had been negotiating to sell SNN's assets to Landmark Communications, Mizlou officials said they'd simply run out of time and money — they eventually pulled the plug on the network on December 17th at 6 p.m. Eastern time after a brief explanation to viewers. Cable system affiliates reported afterward that they were notified just a few hours before the network went dark; the company that had a flawless reputation with TV stations from coast to coast as the largest independent sports network in the country was no more. It should be noted that, despite claims to the contrary, today's Mizlou TV Sports, based out of Atlanta and run by Don "Moose" Lewis, a one-time NWA member, has no affiliation with or connection to the original company.

With Mizlou pulling out, Craig got somewhat cold feet. He didn't want to take all the risk, so we were left with a huge financial gap to fill.

Dan Druckman stepped forward and said he could deliver an investor or investors who would put up the money, but they would want controlling interest in the company. At that point Craig wasn't willing to be a partner with someone he didn't know and agreed to let me run with the ball on my own. We had an understanding that if something could be put together, he would license the WWOW name to me for TV and still be there to help make the live event successful. It's not that he wasn't willing to take the risk — it was more that he didn't want to be indebted to complete strangers. The scheduled November 2nd date was canceled.

Needing someone with a sharp business background to take Craig's place, I asked my brother Arnie to join the project. Although he was reluctant because he had other business priorities and didn't care much for the wrestling business, he agreed to help me out for as long as I needed him.

The first thing I had to do was update the business plan, and instead of including Mizlou as the production company, I inserted Media Productions. Although I still had to find a new syndication company, I leveraged the station lineup Mizlou had provided in my advertising projections since they had actually

cleared the show. I figured that I could provide whoever would do the syndication with the station list, and they could follow up with those stations. The only real difference in the plan from a timing perspective was that we now had to target an April delivery instead of a January one. On the positive side, both Syers and Predmest were still on board and Syers offered to do the syndication if we needed him to.

Druckman, meanwhile, had a close friend who was somewhat interested in the project, and after I provided a copy of the updated business plan, he wanted to know more. So Dan arranged for his friend to meet with Arnie and me at my brother's office. After grilling my brother about why he wasn't going to put up any money himself, the guy agreed to provide the financing after accepting that Arnie had his funds tied up in his other business. However, less than two hours later he sent Arnie a fax stating he wouldn't put the money up after all, citing my brother's lack of financial commitment to the project. In hindsight, though, it was a damn good thing that he never got involved because I heard that years later he was involved in some shady dealings and is serving time for drug trafficking, tax evasion and a variety of other federal charges. Bob Cohen was right on the mark with his comment about not knowing who we were getting into business with, and that statement would rear its ugly head many times over the next 18 years.

Once again it was looking as though the television project was going into cardiac arrest, but Dan said he had another idea. Within a month he was able to bring the project back to life by pulling together a small group of investors to put up the money needed to shoot television. The group included three of his friends (Donald Baker, Bruce Neuman and Lenny Sklawer), his accountant (Bruce Harris), his accountant's friend who was an attorney (David Berman) and himself. I was able to get one person to put up some of the money too, a former business associate (David Rafky) who owned a computer business in Miami.

At one point in the finance-gathering process the deal nearly fell apart when Harris and Berman, two of the bigger investors, decided to pull out, feeling my brother Arnie was a bit too overbearing when it came to structuring the shareholder's agreement. While I didn't agree with their assessment, had they pulled out of the deal the whole thing would have come crashing down, so I agreed to move forward without Arnie, taking a smaller piece of the overall pie.

While at first my brother felt I screwed him — rightfully so since he put a couple of months into the project — when it came right down to it, Arnie completely understood this was my dream and not his. He knew it was an opportunity for me and was willing to look the other way because it was something that I wanted to pursue and not something he particularly cared about. Forgiving my

self-absorption and ultimately giving me his blessing, Arnie stepped away.

Shortly thereafter we signed our shareholder's agreement, and on October 30, 1989, the articles of incorporation were filed with the state of Florida for the creation of Ladies Major League Wrestling, Inc. We were back on the road to putting a television show together. One of the provisions in the shareholder's agreement was that I was to receive a modest salary as long as business was being conducted — it was a stipulation that Arnie had insisted be included when he originally negotiated with the investors.

With the money raised it was time to get busy, and after cutting a deal with Craig to license the WWOW name for the TV show and hiring him to help with promoting the live event, we did everything to cut as many corners as we could.

One major cost-cutting option came about after a meeting with Mario Savoldi. Mario, who owned and operated ICW and had a pretty decent station lineup in place at the time, offered to produce our show, syndicate it, distribute it and even book talent for it after I shared with him how much we had raised to produce the show. And wouldn't you know it, the price he was going to charge us was the exact amount that we had raised. The only difference was, Mario promised to deliver 13 episodes instead of four.

At the time Mario was partnered with Howard Rapp, one of the principals of Charles Rapp Enterprises, a New York–based entertainment planning organization that was founded in 1935 by Howard's uncle, Charlie Rapp. They had stroke in setting up live events, and Charlie had made his mark by developing new talent and booking shows for more than a hundred resort hotels in the Catskills. Charlie was credited with helping to develop the "Borscht Belt" early careers of people like Milton Berle and Jackie Mason. Howard had joined the company full time in 1969, after having worked every summer since his 13th birthday. After Charlie's death in 1974, Howard and another worker, Arnold Graham, had taken charge, and together they brought the company into the modern era, helping to develop the careers of new talent, such as Ray Romano, Jerry Seinfeld, Rodney Dangerfield and Jay Leno. They were also credited with bringing first time appearances in the Catskill Mountains area for such stars as George Burns and Bob Hope. Howard had helped Mario get into the buildings where he shot his television show, and he would now do the same for WWOW.

While on the surface it sounded like a good deal, we knew that if we moved forward we'd be losing many of the things that we were trying to accomplish, including the two we felt were absolutely necessary for us to be successful — an arena look and quality talent. Luna understood the vision we had of creating a product and brand that would blend the WWF's larger-than-life characterizations

with the Japanese style of ladies' wrestling, which is something Mario not only disagreed with but never really understood. We wanted to bring legitimacy to ladies' wrestling and erase the ridicule that had been established by GLOW and, to a lesser degree, mud wrestling.

Even though I had provided a letter of intent to Mario, we never got to the contract stage, and after I realized I would be compromising too much, including what was promised to the investors, some of the talent who we had already spoken to and those who would be selling the advertising, the deal was called off. To say Mario was pissed off would be an understatement, and he threatened legal action. The investors supported my decision, however, and after I told Mario where he could stick his threats, we moved forward with the plans that were previously in place. I was upset that things with Mario had deteriorated because he was one of the people who had helped open the door to the business for me, and there I was betraying him to some degree, at least that's how I felt at the time. But I knew I had a responsibility to my business partners first, and by this point I wasn't about to be bullied — not by him or anybody else.

By the time we were ready to pull it all together, it was after the first of the year. With Friday, March 23, 1990, as the date we were scheduled to shoot television and the 2,000-seat War Memorial Auditorium set as our venue, we could have used an entire staff of people to complete everything on our to-do list. But when it came down to actually getting things done, it was really a two-person endeavor. There was me, and there was Craig.

After we had identified the talent we wanted to book for the four hours of television, we got Luna to start making the phone calls to get the best prices she could. Not wanting to alienate Phyllis Lee, although she was more or less out of the project at this point, we let her book some of the undercard talent. In hindsight, it was a big mistake to have Luna negotiate prices for us. Being one of the girls herself, she wasn't about to take the side of the office over that of her friends. It was an expensive lesson, and the talent made out very well.

Meanwhile, Craig was given the job of ensuring we had a full house for television. Knowing we were more concerned with having fans in the seats than generating box office receipts, he had a brilliant idea on how we could fill the stands *and* get a ton of free advertising. First, we decided to make the tickets dirt cheap — three dollars each — so anybody and everybody who wanted to attend could. Second, Khambrel Marshall, the sports director at the local ABC affiliate, who Craig was friendly with, had a pet charity in town called Kids in Crisis, which helped neglected and abused children. Craig thought that if we donated the entire box office gate to Khambrel's charity, in exchange he would help with publicity for

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

Luna Vachon poses between Khambrel Marshall (left) and Rick Shaw (right) during the taping of a WWOW PSA

the event. After Craig pitched the idea, Khambrel couldn't do enough to ensure all of South Florida knew about the event. We were able to get charity rates for the *Miami Herald* and the *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel* newspapers and radio spots. Thanks to Khambrel, Rick Shaw, the program director at WAXY 105.9 FM and a local radio icon also got involved to publicize the event, and we even shot a public service announcement with the two of them and Luna to promote the show; it got plenty of airplay.

Still in a cost cutting mode but not to the extent that it would jeopardize our production values, I was able to work out deals to get many of the ancillary costs offset through corporate sponsorships. Hotel rooms, limousine service, tuxedo rentals for the on-air talent and support staff were all secured in exchange for "promotional consideration" when the show would broadcast. In addition, through my brother Marty's travel agency, I was able to get Eastern Airlines to come on board as a promotional partner, as they provided all of our airline tickets, with the exception of a round-trip out of Los Angeles for Lisa Moretti (a.k.a. Ivory, Nina Ferrari, Tina Ferrari, Tina Moretti, et al), for around $100 or $150 per ticket.

Our talent roster was starting to shape up, even though we had a couple of hiccups — Misty Blue Simmes and her stable of Kat LaRoux, Linda Dallas and others passed on our invitation to participate — but we still had to choose a broadcasting

team. I knew exactly who I wanted to call the play-by-play and who I wanted to be the color commentator. If we were going to put this brand forward as the legitimate product we wanted it to be, we needed a no-nonsense duo. I called on Gordon Solie to call the action.

Without hesitation Gordon said yes, and even though he had just started back with WCW, there was nothing in his contract to prevent him from doing our show too. With the Dean on board I knew it was going to be easier to get the other half of my dream team, wrestling's "Living Legend" Bruno Sammartino. Bruno had recently left the WWF, and I felt his name, together with Gordon's, would give us instant recognition with both wrestling fans and television stations. Bruno, however, wasn't easily sold on the prospect of WWOW, and it took some serious convincing on my part to get him on board. Like many of the old-timers, Bruno didn't particularly care for lady's wrestling, and he looked on it in much the same way many look on midget wrestling, as a special attraction only. He questioned whether or not the girls could carry a 60-minute show beyond any initial sex appeal and further questioned if we had the level of talent to not only provide enough of a variety of matches but to execute and sustain angles. While the "sex appeal" would be a bit of a challenge, I gave him my word that the presentation would be first class and said that it was up to him and Gordon, as the storytellers, to help get the product and workers across to the audience. Bruno and I agreed on terms, and wrestling's announcing dream team was all set.

The final element for our production team was a director, and it couldn't be just anyone. We needed someone who had the experience with wrestling and knew how to work a multi-camera shoot. While Jim Haney at Media Productions suggested we use the director that did Global, Gordon and Hiro both suggested David Togie, the longtime director for Championship Wrestling from Florida. When I contacted Dave and told him what we were trying to accomplish production-wise, meaning we needed to take the $20,000 we set aside for production and make it look like $100,000, it took him all of about 10 minutes to tell me how we he would execute that vision. Aside from working out a few minor details, he was on board.

Everything was taking shape nicely. Mike Predmest even helped off set some upfront costs by bringing us a sponsor called AES Alarms, which specialized in emergency medical systems. For $5,000 we agreed to put the AES name and logo on our mat and give them an opening "brought to you in part by" spot in the show. We were starting to hit our stride.

Then a few weeks before the shoot, we had a bomb dropped on us. Two, actually. First, we learned through the grapevine (telephone, telegraph, tell-a-wrestler) that there was another ladies' wrestling group setting up to shoot television out of

Laughlin, Nevada. The LPWA (Ladies Professional Wrestling Association), led by Tor Berg and his business partner Leonard Grau, were supposedly well financed and were going to put out a show similar to ours. That did not bode well for our plan to be the only all-girls show offered to television stations. Then, as if that news wasn't bad enough, Gordon dropped the news that Jim Herd, the then executive vice president of WCW, would not let him be on camera for a group that could potentially be considered their competition. Gordon suggested I give Herd a call to try to work something out. Not surprisingly, Jim Herd took my call, and, despite my trying to persuade him otherwise, there was no way he was going to let Gordon appear. Although I did manage to convince him we were not going to be a threat to WCW, he finally admitted that he was mostly concerned with viewers thinking WWOW was a part of WCW if Gordon was involved. He argued it was for that reason, and that reason alone, that he did not want Gordon to appear on our program. Our conversation ended with me inviting him to come to our taping — he accepted but never showed up.

Now what? Where were we going to get a new play-by-play person on such short notice? We needed someone who could provide credibility and have good on-air chemistry with Bruno. When I called Bruno to tell him the bad news about Gordon being pulled from the show by WCW, he suggested a friend of his from Pittsburgh who had a great deal of experience calling wrestling, Bill Cardille.

Cardille, a local Pittsburgh weatherman, was best known in the area as Chilly Billy Cardilly, or simply Chilly Billy, having earned his famous nickname by hosting the local *Chiller Theater* television show for 20 years. Joe Flaherty, a Pittsburgh native, acknowledged the show as influencing behind SCTV's "Monster Chiller Horror Theatre" and his popular "Count Floyd" character. George Romero, another native of the Steel City, cast Bill as a field reporter in *Night of the Living Dead*. But I knew Cardille, not as Chilly Billy or a field reporter but as the host of the old WWWF TV shows in the days before Vince McMahon Jr. took over the microphone. To this day I remember Bill calling a match in 1971 or '72 in which one of the young babyfaces was making his comeback on Dick "The Bulldog" Brower, and Cardille got so excited and so pumped at the unlikely offensive attack that he shouted, "Hey, hey, hey . . . ALRIGHT!" Not exactly your classic play-by-play performance, but the inflection and excitement of that call has stayed with me ever since. When I told Craig that Cardille would be filling in for Gordon, I think he was more excited about Chilly Billy coming on board than he was about Bruno. Being from Philly and remembering Cardille from the old Keystone Wrestling Club and "Studio Wrestling," Craig recalled nearly all of Bill's one-liners and even wrote them on index cards for him so he could use them when calling WWOW.

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

Bruno Sammartino and Bill Cardille get ready to announce the Wild Women of Wrestling

As crunch time approached I should have been on cloud nine, but I'd become a nervous wreck. I felt I was losing more and more of my grip on the creative side of the project. Each time I came up with an idea, Luna would kibosh it, claiming I shouldn't change anyone's gimmick because they were already established. The fact was, apart from a handful of the girls, nobody would know who the workers were. Only Wendi Richter, Candi Devine, Lelani Kai, Judy Martin, Peggy Lee Leather, Tina Moretti and perhaps Luna herself were known commodities. Although Bambi (Selina Major) and Malia Hosaka would have long careers and are still active on the independent circuit, at the time they were still relative unknowns. So when I came up with the idea to turn Penelope Paradise and Heidi Lee Morgan into Crystal and Alexa Barrington, a takeoff of the characters Krystle and Alexis Carrington from the TV show *Dynasty*, I got nothing but grief. The same thing went for another tag team that we put under masks — mostly to cover their faces because makeup just wouldn't be enough. I wanted to call a black-hooded tag team the Fallen Angels, but Luna argued that Nancy Sullivan was the Fallen Angel and we would be stealing her name, even though Nancy hadn't done that gimmick in a dog's age. I caved in and ended up naming the girls Specter and Banshee and calling them the Mystiques, which was a name I thought appropriate since it sounded a lot like "mistake," and that would be my own private protest over not calling them what I wanted to. Luna and I also butted heads over having a male wrestler pose as a female wrestler on the show. The 1988 Olympic Games were still fresh in people's minds, and there

had been an incident involving East German female athletes who tested positive for an abundance of testosterone. Some of the comedians of the day said they were actually men. I wanted to have a male wrestler who could somewhat pass as a female wrestler, who, no matter what he did, could never win a match. The thing that would have made it work would be that everyone would have known 100 percent it was a male, with him and his manager in a constant state of denial. Despite the fact that the young and lanky Sean Waltman was willing to do the gimmick for us — kind of a twist on Ronnie Garvin's Miss Atlanta Lively gimmick, in which he dressed in drag to knock out Ric Flair — and that Luna had originally liked the idea and had convinced Sean to do it for us, when push came to shove, Luna thought the concept poked too much fun at the girls and actually threatened to quit if we moved forward with the idea. My fourth and final clash with Luna over talent had to do with reprising William Blue's Famous Amos character that we had created for the show at J.J.'s. Luna claimed he was not available, and instead she suggested we use this indie manager from Central Florida who did a knockoff of Ernie Roth's character as Abdullah Farouk Jr. I later learned that she had not even attempted to contact Blue and had only booked Farouk because he was booking indie shows in Central Florida and had promised her a few paydays. Luna was playing the politics game very well.

The Saturday before our taping, WCW decided to run a show in the area at one of the local colleges. While it ticked us off that they would purposely run the same week as us, we didn't let it consume us. They did their thing, and we did ours, and in the days preceding the show there wasn't a place in South Florida where you didn't see or hear something about what we were doing. The weekend before the show, while WCW was busy drawing 600 people, we were busy promoting. Craig had arranged for a plane to fly over Fort Lauderdale Beach pulling a banner to promote our event. He also put together a street team, in the days before people had even heard of the term, and blanketed the Fort Lauderdale strip from one end to the other with flyers and posters. On the day before the arena shoot, while I was running around town with Dave Togie and Luna shooting vignettes of some of the girls for TV, Craig arranged to get the rest of the girls on various radio and television shows around town. And on the day of the shoot, both the *Herald* and *Sun-Sentinel* ran features on us. Simply put, Craig had done a phenomenal job of leveraging a huge network of friends and personal contacts to execute a well–mapped out promotional plan. Craig had learned about promoting by working with Danny Miller and Frank Boscia at Championship Wrestling from Florida. By sitting back and watching how they operated — not only seeing what worked but what was a waste of time and energy — he really became a student of the art.

All we had to do now was have our event, and we would be ready for the next phase of marketing WWOW.

This will sound strange, but the taping was in many ways anticlimactic. To me it was everything leading up to the event that was important — I thought the show would essentially run itself. While I was nervous beforehand, once we got underway I couldn't afford to be strung out. I was pulled in so many directions by so many people that I never even got the chance to put on my tuxedo. I ran around from one place to another dealing with the production company, our investors, the building management and talent issues.

Another mounting problem was that Dave Togie took it upon himself to wear too many hats. Aside from being the director, he was also trying to coordinate arena music and talent queues. The few times I actually got a chance to look at a monitor backstage and saw a production flaw, when I asked him about it, he responded that we would clean it up in postproduction. That was not a good sign, but who was I to question someone with that much experience? The show didn't run itself, and there were huge gaps in everything from the length and timing of the matches to the preparation for the announcers and some of the other things Bruno had voiced concerns about.

While Luna might have been around the wrestling business all her life, it was apparent she didn't have enough experience to book a project like this. It's one thing to come up with finishes for six or seven matches at a small house show, but she didn't have the skill set necessary to coordinate 24 matches for four hours of groundbreaking television and provide the detail and perspective necessary to ensure match variety, what the workers should and shouldn't do during their matches and what the announcers should talk and not talk about. I know she did the best she could, but unfortunately neither Craig nor I recognized her flaws until after the fact because we were too green ourselves. We would have been much better served by having someone like Bob Roop, Larry Malenko or even Dick Slater take on the role for us.

Backstage was a madhouse. We were shorthanded, and that created a bit of a problem when getting the girls into their standby positions and ready for their next match. Sharon joined the production team as a floor manager, working the area considered the Gorilla position (named for Gorilla Monsoon, who had that role in WWF for many years). Half the time the girls didn't go out when they were supposed to because either they weren't listening to Sharon, or they simply weren't where they were supposed to be. Instead of being ready, most of the time they were either changing their outfits or having their hair or makeup done. We actually had an area set up for the girls with professional hairstylists and makeup artists. The

place reeked of hairspray.

Aside from the craziness, two of the things I remember most are Craig coming to me right before we opened the doors to sell tickets and telling me fans were lined up nearly around the block and the late "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers showing up unannounced and uninvited.

Rogers, who lived in the area, came by to check out our operation, and when he saw our setup he approached us, saying he would like to be involved. What was most interesting was that there was still a great deal of heat between him and Bruno, 27 years after their famed Madison Square Garden match. Although Bruno remained cordial toward Rogers out of respect for me, the more Rogers spoke to him, the more frustrated and angrier I could see him getting. I could see he wanted to say something, but he bit his lip. Bill Otten, who was shooting for the Japanese wrestling magazine *Baseball Sha* that night, saw the two of them together and snapped their photo; I believe it was the first public pic of them together since that night at MSG. When Bill Cardille told me that Bruno "can't stand him," I immediately intervened and told Buddy that Bruno had to get ready for the show and that I needed him. Buddy apologized for tying him up, and as Bruno and I walked away from the former champ, Bruno only mustered an annoyed "Boy, oh boy . . ." A short time afterward Rogers left the building, and when I asked Bruno what he thought about Rogers joining us, perhaps as a manager, he told me point blank that if Rogers were going to be involved he wouldn't be.

The night was like one long, nonstop roller-coaster ride — you scream and yell while you're riding through the twists and turns as it scares the hell out of you, but when you finally come to a complete stop, after you've had a chance to catch your breath and realize just how much fun the ride actually was, the first thing you want to do is get right back in line.

So there I was, standing on the stage of the now empty War Memorial Auditorium, and as I watched the ring being taken down and the production people packing everything up, all I could think about was doing this again. Despite all the little problems, despite all the big problems, despite all the stress, all I wanted to do was take another wrestling roller-coaster ride.

Craig and I waited for the last of the production staff to leave, and then finally it was just the two of us. It had been one hell of a night, and Craig was so pumped he didn't want to change out of his tuxedo. My twin brother from a different mother and I hugged triumphantly. We had accomplished what so many others had set out to do, but only a handful had actually delivered. We knew there was still a lot of work ahead to make women's wrestling viable, but for now we were like conquering Roman soldiers.

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

Future WWE star Ivory (Lisa Moretti), poses with photographer Howard Baum

We became so cocky that over time we began to embellish how successful the night actually was. Although we drew a little more than 800 paying customers, by giving away another 100 or so tickets to our investors, the charity, local celebrities, family members and friends, we legitimately outdrew WCW that week by nearly 300 people — and that was a hell of an achievement. However, it wasn't good enough for us. For years Craig and I padded that number, first telling people we drew 1,100 that night, and then after a while it became 1,200. Eventually I think we topped it off at around 1,500 or 1,600, until the inflated number became part of our own urban legend. Nothing was going to bring us down.

I had one final business thing to do for the night, and afterward Craig and I would go for a celebratory Grand Slam breakfast at Denny's. While nearly everybody had got their pay envelope, for some reason Lisa Moretti hadn't, so Craig and I double-backed to the hotel where all the girls were staying. Not knowing offhand what room she was in, Craig stayed in the car while I hunted her down. Most of the girls were hanging around outside their rooms and thanked me for having them involved and treating them well. Once pointed to Lisa's room, my knock was met with a "come on in." My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Lisa was in this unbelievably revealing baby blue nightie that left absolutely nothing to my imagination. I was mesmerized by the sight, and for the first time in nearly seven years of marriage, I thought about cheating on my wife. Not that Lisa was offering, but to paraphrase a line from former President Jimmy Carter, that night I truly had lust in my heart. Thinking the better of it, I gave Lisa her money and got out of there

as fast as I could. I suppose I was so pumped up and confident from what we had done that I actually thought I could score. Luckily I never tested that theory. However, it didn't stop me from describing to Craig in great detail what I saw, and, thinking back, just like he and I overstated the number of people we had in the building, I probably exaggerated a little to Craig.

Looking back on that time, perhaps the most important thing I learned was that nothing is ever as it appears — and you should always be prepared for what life might throw at you.

Remember how Leonardo DiCaprio's Jack Dawson character in *Titanic* stood on the bow of the ship, and said he was "the king of the world"? Well, that's exactly how I felt. Unfortunately, he didn't know what his ultimate fate would be, and sadly where I was headed wouldn't be much better. I was celebrating victory, and while I moved along the waters and went deeper into the night, I didn't have a clue that I was heading right for an iceberg.

If life were predictable it would cease to be life, and without flavor.
— Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962)

SEVEN

FLIGHT OF THE BUMBLEBEE

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

Selina Majors (a.k.a. Bambi) was to be the flag bearer for LMLW

Aerodynamically the bumblebee shouldn't be able to fly, but the bumblebee doesn't know that so it goes on flying anyway.
— Mary Kay Ash (1918–2001)

When Craig and I first made the decision to try our hands at promoting, we did it so blindly that it didn't matter to us that others who had tried before us had failed. Although we were somewhat aware of their plight, we just didn't realize how many start-ups, or even established wrestling companies, had gone belly up. Maybe we just didn't want to think about it.

I don't know why Craig and I thought we could succeed where others had failed, but we did. Maybe we thought we were smarter than the others. Maybe we thought we had better ideas. But the reality was that those companies had been run by people who not only had more experience than we did, they were better financed and often had strong corporate infrastructures and support staffs in place.

When it came down to it, Ladies Major League Wrestling had, well, me. Craig helped — he was both my confidant and right-hand man when crunch time came — but he couldn't dedicate 100 percent of his time to the cause since he had another business. When I ultimately decided to go forward with the backers and he balked, it became my show. I would be the one who would succeed or fail, and the light would always shine squarely on me.

Was I really that arrogant?

While I may have been resolute in my endeavor, I should have known there were undisputable facts. No matter how much grit and determination one has, without the right tools at one's disposal, even the greatest engineer in the world can't build something that will stand the test of time.

Trying to build and maintain a successful women's wrestling company on a national level with what I had to work with, I could only be successful if every piece of the overwhelming puzzle was perfectly in place. I just kept moving forward like the bumblebee who didn't know it shouldn't be able to fly.

Fresh from shooting television and outdrawing WCW, we began the onerous task of editing our four one-hour programs, while our newly contracted television syndication person began lining up stations. Getting him on board had been tough, and although he came to me highly recommended, once I met him face-to-face, I was not exactly beaming with confidence.

On paper, all of our research demonstrated that big profits could be made if we had the right station lineup; advertisers bought then as they do now, based on Nielsen numbers (the number of households that tune into a show). But with Mizlou out of the picture, getting a company on board was a lot harder than I thought it would be. Without a substantial up-front investment, the big syndication companies would have nothing to do with us. And when I reconnected with Syndicast, where Bob Syers had offered to do our syndication, Len Koch informed me that Bob was no longer with the company and he didn't know how to reach him. The truth was Len did know how to contact him but wasn't about to tell me, as I'm sure he wanted Bob to fail after having left and taken some clients with him. Although Syndicast was still going to broker our advertising time, Len said he didn't have anyone in his office strong enough to syndicate a pro wrestling show, even with the original list of committed stations that Mizlou had given us.

With no one willing to syndicate the show, my feathers started to ruffle. I certainly didn't want to try myself after having failed miserably with my radio shows. Besides, there was only so much one person could do, and I needed to run a wrestling company. It was rough going, but, after a series of phone calls, I ended up talking with someone from my own backyard.

Shelly Schermer was a semiretired television syndicator who was by then more into brokering real estate than distributing TV. His background was in film distribution; he'd worked for Warner Brothers and United Artists as a regional salesman in Ohio before helping to run a motion picture company with K. Gordon Murray in South Florida during the early '60s. Eventually Shelly had landed a job with RCA (Recreation Corporation of America) in South Florida, running both their television station, WKID-TV, which was eventually sold and became the Telemundo Network, and R&S Films, which produced a number of B movies. RCA's most notable holding was Pirate's World, an 87-acre buccaneer-themed amusement park in Dania, Florida. Opened in 1966, Pirate's World had been successful in its early years, but when Walt Disney World opened in 1971, Florida tourism shifted from South to Central Florida, and compared to the Magic Kingdom, Pirate's World was quaint, old-fashioned and a bit dangerous. By 1973 it was in bankruptcy, and by 1975 it had closed its doors for good.

When RCA sold off its assets, Shelly struck a deal to leverage their library of B movies and launched a syndication business with which he found modest success. His big claim to fame was that he syndicated the seasonal children's animated special *Santa and the Three Bears*. When I approached him about WWOW, he told me that even though I had a list of stations who had committed to take the show from Mizlou, he didn't have time to devote to the project. But he recommended someone who did — Art Millman, who owned a company called Worldwide Syndications and lived in the Tampa area. Millman had worked for Shelly syndicating *Santa* and some of those B movies.

On the phone, Art Millman seemed like he knew his stuff. He had this positive, upbeat attitude and was not fazed by the challenge of trying to syndicate a ladies' wrestling show. Before making a final decision I wanted to meet him in person, and after he came to South Florida for a face-to-face, I began having reservations. He was optimistic, buoyant and hungry, but he seemed old and did not have the outward appearance I felt was necessary to go to stations and meet with program directors. But with no other prospect on the horizon, I decided to go with Art.

Back in the editing studio, another headache surfaced. It seemed our producer/director Dave Togie, who couldn't make the editing sessions, had relied a little too heavily on postproduction to clean up the show. Almost immediately,

Luna, who I had asked to sit in on the sessions, and I found ourselves having to instruct our editor, future Emmy-award winner John Dzuro, to fix much more than we had anticipated. Even though Media gave us a package that included 40 hours of postproduction, we were going to blow through it in no time. That led us to a bigger problem . . . at a rate of $150 per hour, we couldn't afford to go beyond our paid-for time.

To help rectify the situation, we put postproduction editing on hold, and Jim Haney, who ran Media, gave us an editing room and an in-house producer, J.C. Summerford, free of charge so we could edit the remaining shows off-line, allowing us to walk into the more expensive postproduction suite with a time-coded edit list. It was a huge help, but we knew we were still going to be over budget. Knowing we needed more money, I spoke to Bruce Harris, and he was able to bring in a fellow named Billy Collins, the building manager of the Miami Arena. Collins put another $10,000 into the company, and his money ensured Luna and I could continue receiving weekly salaries and that there was enough to pay for editing the second show and business expenses like telephone and syndication.

On the syndication front, bad news began trickling in. Even though television stations were getting the first episode and liked the product, they were skeptical about us being able to produce 52 one-hour shows, and with the Mizlou name no longer attached to the project, even the stations that had initially agreed to clear the show were balking. Additionally, Art was finding that some of the stations had already committed to airing the LPWA and wouldn't take a second women's wrestling program. Without a station lineup in place, Len Koch couldn't sell the time and Mike Predmest couldn't buy time on behalf of his clients. Even though we gave an outward appearance of progress, LMLW and our WWOW TV show was actually coming apart at the seams.

I also began to question Predmest's credibility. The company he had brought in that put their logo on our mat for $5,000, AES Alarms, now refused to pay the $2,500 balance they owed. We ended up taking them to court, and, thanks to an incompetent attorney, we lost the case. What should have been a slamdunk breach of contract win turned into a travesty as AES's attorney made one ridiculous accusation after another, which our attorney didn't know how to quash. While they got my goat, looking back I think my favorite accusation was that I not only forged the signature of their company's president on the agreement, but that I broke into their offices, cracked the safe where their checks were kept, stole one of their checks and forged the owner's signature on that too. When we called Predmest in as our witness to testify about how he had brought them in as a sponsor, he tried to maintain his relationship with them and skirted around our attorney's direct questioning, and the

judge brought the proceedings to a halt. She knew we were being bamboozled by the countersuit AES had filed, but, following the letter of the law, because our attorney couldn't prove AES had breached the terms of the contract by failing to pay us, she dismissed their obligation. They were off the hook. From that point forward, I had zero confidence in anything Predmest said.

There were other issues looming on the horizon that would impact our business. We kept our game faces on, but these matters would contribute to our ultimate demise.

In May, through a connection Craig had made with a booking company that worked with sports celebrities, we sent Luna and her then live-in boyfriend, Dick Slater, on a cruise called Sports Afloat with Norwegian Cruise Lines. It was a free cruise for Dick and Luna with the understanding that they were obligated to interact with the fans on the ship. When they returned two weeks later, they seemed to have had a good time, and told us they had interacted with NFL players, boxers and jockeys and had found a special bond with the local jai alai players who were on board.

All seemed just fine, but Luna was going through a personal crisis. Both Craig and I knew Slater was verbally abusive at times, but when that occurred Luna usually stood her ground; to use wrestling terminology, she gave him a receipt. But then we started hearing that Slater was physically abusive too. We never saw visible signs, and whenever we'd broach the subject with her she would change the topic or say the rumors were unfounded. One thing was certain though, she *was* afraid of him. While working out of my house, sometimes within 30 minutes of her arriving for work, Slater would call and argue with her, and she would have to leave. I didn't really mind because there wasn't much for her to do except answer the phones, but we still needed to justify her salary.

Finally the situation came to a head, and it got pretty ugly.

One night Luna showed up at my door at three in the morning seeking a safe haven from Slater. Sharon and I weren't about to turn her away, and we told her she could have our guest room. But Luna wasn't alone. She asked if her "friend" could stay the night too. The friend would turn out to be her future husband, Tom Nash.

I knew Tom from when he first trained at Malenko's, and, unlike the other workers who came out of that school, I didn't particularly care for him. Tom came across like a smug, snot-nosed jerk. But he hadn't always been like that. When Malenko first sent Tom up to Calgary, he was a nice, easy-going kid. His only fault was his smart-alecky mouth, which he never learned to keep shut. That was enough to piss off the British Bulldogs (Davey Boy Smith and Dynamite Kid), and they

began ribbing Tom nonstop. By the time Tom finally learned to keep his yap closed, he had suffered weeks of verbal and physical abuse, which included having his ring jacket cut up and toothpaste put in his pockets. But then the ribbing turned downright dangerous. One night Tom Billington (Dynamite Kid) put Halcion — a drug generally used as a sedative to treat insomnia — into Tom's beer. When Tom passed out, he and Davey Boy stripped him naked and rolled him up in a carpet, accidentally breaking his nose. When Tom came to, the Bulldogs convinced him that while he was drunk he had been beaten up by an old lady. Then they finally crossed the line. Smith and Billington forced Tom to stand upside down and naked in a locker room while they threw used steroid needles at his butt. Tom finally had enough and ran back to Florida. Those around him knew he had changed, and those who were closest to him said he took on a very mean personality. Eventually Tom went back to Calgary but with another of Malenko's students, Dave Heath, and they took on the personalities of the Blackhearts. While the Bulldogs tried to pull the same stuff with Dave, unlike Tom, he refused to allow the two Brits to take advantage of him. Tom never stood up for himself.

Regardless of how I felt about Tom, I was cordial to him for Luna's sake, and the next morning the two of them left to find a place to stay. Almost immediately the calls from Slater began, asking me if I had heard from his wife. I lied and said "no," telling him that she hadn't come to work, and technically she hadn't. Every hour on the hour Slater would call, asking me if I had heard from her. I stuck to my story, but by then I knew that she and Tom had checked into a cheap motel in Fort Lauderdale. With each call Slater made, he seemed more frustrated, and he was getting angrier, finally accusing me of hiding her at my place. When I told him he had to stop calling me and that if I heard from her I would give her a message, he threatened to shove his fist down my throat.

Although Slater himself finally stopped calling my home after I didn't answer the phone for two days, screening every call through the answering machine (this was in the days prior to caller ID) he had mutual friends call me and plead to have Luna call. Jeff Gardner called and said Slater was heartbroken and not eating. I don't know what Slater actually said to Jeff, but I knew Slater was full of crap because, based on the calls he made directly to me, he sounded more enraged than heartbroken, no longer having Luna under his control. I was legitimately scared for Luna's safety and my own wellbeing.

When I heard in 2003 that a pilled-up Slater had been arrested for attempted murder of his then live-in girlfriend, Theresa Marie Halbert, having stabbed her with an eight-inch butcher knife and sticking around to watch her bleed, it didn't surprise me at all. I know Slater later blamed his actions on the pain medication he

took for back injuries, but all I kept thinking was "What if Luna had stayed with that maniac?" Since Slater knew where I lived, I told Luna to stay away for a while. She and Tom stayed holed up at that motel for a few weeks until Slater finally moved his things out of their house. Once he was gone, they changed all the locks, and Tom moved in. She was finally out of harm's way.

With a kind of normalcy returning to our lives, it was time to get back into the studio and finish editing. A behind-the-scenes deal had been completed in which Media had been bought by a group called Club Theatre Network (CTN), a publicly traded company that was about to embark on a new television production technology called high definition.

During one of the editing sessions, as Luna and I were going through the raw footage with J.C. to select the shots that would go into our final edited product, Ron Ratner, the silver-pompadoured president of CTN, stopped by to properly introduce himself. He looked somewhat familiar, and I realized I had seen him on some of the raw footage we had just been looking at. He also reminded me that Jim Haney had introduced us at the event itself.

Without realizing what he was getting himself into, Ron made an offer that floored me. He said he thought we had a unique product and that CTN would like to be more involved. He might as well have been wearing a big red "S" on his shirt because we really needed someone to swoop in with more money.

Not wanting to appear too eager, I told Ron I'd talk to my partners and get back to him. That night I called Bruce, and he agreed that we should try to bring CTN in if we could. Since he and I pretty much controlled the board with our proxies, within weeks CTN was on board. We had a commitment letter drawn up that outlined a new corporate entity, in which Ladies Major League Wrestling and CTN would each hold 50 percent ownership. As part of their investment, CTN absorbed the outstanding balance we owed to Media, which enabled us to finish editing the shows we'd already shot. They also gave us office space in their building — we no longer had to work out of my house — and they put some hard currency into our bank account to ensure that Luna and I would be paid for a few months. Luna made around $325 a week, and I made a little closer to $400. The cash infusion also allowed us to put on a couple of live events, just to keep our name out there.

As we headed into the summer, the prognosis for starting on television in September was not good. Millman was simply not delivering stations. While he had a handful that wanted to air the show, it was like my radio syndication project all over again: we simply did not have enough stations to get national or regional sponsors. And with no broadcast outlets in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago, the top three U.S. television markets, there was no way to attract sponsors who would

be willing to buy spots piecemeal. Without sponsors there was no income . . . and without income we'd be dead in the water.

Even though Millman had no luck with any of the regional sports networks, I simply refused to accept that they wouldn't take the show, especially since Mizlou had achieved advance clearance from virtually everyone. It was time to step forward. Because Rob Russen's International Wrestling Association was being broadcast on the eight SportsChannel networks — New York, New England, Chicago, Florida, Los Angeles, the Bay Area (San Francisco), Ohio and Philadelphia — I asked myself how difficult it would really be to barter the show, especially with the type of production values we were delivering, which blew away anything Rob was putting on the air. We might not have been the WWF or WCW, but the look of our show beat anything else out there, including our much better-financed competitor, the LPWA. I thought it was a no-brainer since Rob and I had a good relationship; he had put me in touch with Rick Bassman when Rick headed up promotions at Walt Disney World's Pleasure Island — before he got into the wrestling and MMA business — so we could discuss shooting our pilot shows there.

Thanks to an introduction by Rob, before long I found myself in New York and sitting down with Michael Lardner, the vice president of programming and production for SportsChannel America. After looking at the screener I had brought, Lardner told me he thought the show had a lot of potential but needed some cleaning up. He knew of WWOW and knew that Mizlou had initially been involved because they had cleared the show with him, but a lot had transpired since Mizlou had gone out of business. I was then a little taken aback, as Michael said I should have come to him before shooting so SportsChannel could have been involved from the get-go; now that we had a product on tape, he said he was hesitant but would not rule out the possibility of airing WWOW. He also said that he had already made a long-term commitment to another wrestling company, and if he was going to do business with us, he would need to clear it first with them. He explained to me that he could see WWOW fitting into their *Feet, Fist and Fury* hour slated for the fall schedule, with the feet being kickboxing, the fist being boxing and the fury being pro wrestling. I figured one phone call to Rob when I got home would do the trick, and we'd be on the air come September.

When I got back to Florida and called Rob, he was furious. He began tearing into me about how he hadn't opened a door for me just so I could I steal his spot on SportsChannel, calling me a backstabbing bastard. I told him I had done no such thing and would not get on the air without his approval. He asked me how that could happen if he was no longer going to be on the air?

"What?!"

"You heard me, Howard," he barked. "I've been told IWA is being replaced."

That was news to me. I wondered if I had somehow got WWOW on the air and inadvertently got IWA booted? I promised Rob I would find out what was going on. Considering Rob was being compensated $20,000 a month to produce IWA, I didn't blame him for being irate — I would have been too — but he was irate at the wrong person.

After a couple of days of phone tag I finally spoke to Lardner, and when I asked him about IWA, he told me that IWA was going to finish out their contract and was being replaced by a new company, the Universal Wrestling Federation (UWF).

"Bill Watts?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Herb Abrams."

"Who?"

I had no idea who this new guy was, but I did find it interesting that, according to Lardner, Bruno Sammartino was part of his broadcast team, along with a former WWF play-by-play guy, Craig DeGeorge. I immediately called Bruno.

According to Bruno, Abrams was a longtime wrestling fan who had called him out of the blue, saying he wanted to put a wrestling group together that presented shows like those he remembered growing up in Long Island, New York. Abrams told Bruno he owned a chain of clothing stores across California, and that's where his financing came from. Bruno suggested I work out a deal with Herb. I had also begun talking to another former WWF personality around this time, Lou Albano, about joining WWOW as a manger for our next set of television tapings. He too suggested I speak with Abrams.

By the time I called back Rob to tell him who actually had the deal with SportsChannel, he already knew it wasn't me, and any heat between us was gone. But, like me, he had never heard of Herb, and we were both perplexed how he got the deal without ever having produced a television show or presented a live event.

I've heard all sorts of stories as to how Herb got that deal with SportsChannel, and even though some of the stories were pretty wild, it would not shock me to find they were actually true — I still don't know the full truth. What I do know is that Herb was paid a million dollars for a one-year run, a little more than four times what Rob was being paid. After that, details get sketchy.

Those who were close to Herb at the time say he was able to sell Lardner sight unseen for a variety of reasons, mostly because he promised top line talent, which Rob was not providing. Herb also promised that the shows would originate from New York and Los Angeles, as opposed to Florida where Rob was shooting all of his shows. And Herb promised he would have a recognizable name for his broadcasts; he delivered Bruno Sammartino, while Rob had a virtual unknown in Diamond Dallas Page.

But then there were the dark stories. Some claim that part of the money Herb received found its way to Lardner's personal bank account as a form of payola. I find that absurd, considering Lardner had a great reputation in the industry and would have been risking his career for an amount that was probably nowhere near what he made annually. Others claim that Herb provided a stream of hookers and drugs to the network executives to get the deal, and while he might have been notorious for having those vices himself, I can't see Lardner endangering his career with something so risky. And then there's the nepotism argument. While Abrams and Lardner were not related, somehow Lonnie Lardner, a local Los Angeles news anchor and Michael Lardner's sister, conducted interviews on several UWF shows. I again highly doubt Lardner would put his career in peril for a small payday for his sibling; I think Herb was saying thank you to Michael for giving him the shot on the network.

While it might make for a more interesting story to say that Herb got on television through a variety of unscrupulous means, the truth is that Herb was simply a better salesman than Rob. And, for that matter, almost anyone else I met in the business. When he first started the UWF, he promised the network he would deliver a product that had well-known names, top-of-the-line production values and compelling story lines, and that's exactly what he gave them — in the beginning.

It seemed that if I wanted to get WWOW on SportsChannel I was going to have to work out something with the new guy on the block. But before I was willing to travel down that road, there were two other options that needed to be considered.

The first involved an unlikely trip to an unlikely location with an unlikely customer.

Sometime around June, I sent Luna off to Japan with Jake "the Snake" Roberts's half sister Robin Smith (Rockin' Robin), thanks to the effort of Hiro Matsuda. Meanwhile, Larry Tarnofsky — a veteran concert promoter and stage producer who was a longtime friend of Ratner and had been hired by CTN to develop its live entertainment arm — made arrangements for us to do a series of live events in the Soviet Union. It was hard to figure out how we could realize hard dollars from the deal since the Russian ruble was not traded on the international monetary exchange, but we were set for an early 1991 tour with shows throughout Russia and Georgia. Because actual dollars were few and far between, we needed the Soviet government to barter with us, paying us with something that could easily be cashed out. Through a contact in Tbilisi, Georgia, Tarnofsky arranged for the Soviet government to pay us about $300,000 in Aeroflot airline tickets. I was then able to make arrangements with a multinational bartering company based in New York, the owner of which I had met working at SpyTech, to pay us a little more than

COURTESY HOWARD BAUM, hardwayart.com

Peggy Lee Leather Irish whips Rockin' Robin into the ropes during a match in Florida

$100,000 cash for the tickets. All set to finalize the deal now that we had a way to realize hard dollars out of it, a funny thing happened on the way to the contract signing. By late June, quicker than you could say Nikita Koloff, the winds of democracy were sweeping across Europe. When Georgia declared its independence in October, we officially received word that our tour was canceled. As odd as it seemed, the end of the Cold War brought an end to any chance of us doing business in the U.S.S.R.

The second option, which on the surface didn't seem as impossible as putting together a tour of the Soviet Union, was actually even more improbable. It involved a pretty influential executive at Turner Broadcasting.

Ray Bennett, who was instrumental in Ted Turner's acquisition of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film library, was a personal friend of Captain Courageous. He also happened to sit on the CTN board of directors. While Bennett's strategic appointment to the CTN board was primarily to position Club Theatre so they could secure a contract to convert the MGM film library to high definition, Ron thought perhaps Ray could leverage his personal relationship with Turner to get us a spot on TBS. Although I knew it was highly unlikely, Ratner thought it was worth a shot. Ron and I sat down with Ray Bennett, who told us he would see what he could do. After the meeting, Ron assured me that if anyone could pull off a move like this it was Ray.

Not long after our meeting, Ray was instructed by Turner to sit down with TBS executive Bill Shaw, who, in addition to running TBS Sports, was in charge of wrestling operations. Reporting to Shaw were people like WCW president Jim Herd, who I'd already had bad dealings with, and WCW vice president Bob Dhue, who also ran the Atlanta Omni for Turner. According to Ray, Turner and Shaw liked the

notion of a female wrestling show and believed it could garner good ratings in a late-night time slot. However, before anything could happen, Shaw had to run the idea by "his wrestling people." Although Herd would go along with whatever corporate suits like Shaw suggested, once the project was put in front of the likes of Dusty, Ole Anderson and others of the old wrestling guard, it was quickly squashed.

Having run out of options and with nothing to lose, I finally called Bruno, and he put me in contact with Herb. While I don't remember how that first conversation went, I imagine it was positive enough, as Herb flew in from L.A. to meet with me to discuss creating a relationship between the LMLW and the UWF.

When he walked off the plane, he carried himself as though he was the most important person arriving, but the thing that I remember most about meeting Herb that first time was his snakeskin cowboy boots.

Although short in stature, about five foot five and small-framed, Herb carried himself as though he owned his surroundings. While I could suggest he suffered from a Napoleon complex, Herb was very mindful of that perception and, for the most part, hid it well. Even so, I could not help noticing those cowboy boots. It looked as though the boots wore him rather than the other way around.

To those who knew him, Herb was a character and a mark for the big-name wrestlers. He treated his top guys very well, often paying them two or three times more than they were actually worth, while the undercard guys sometimes didn't get paid at all. He also took care of his entourage. But while Herb could be a stand-up guy, he seemed to enjoy taking advantage of people, especially those with who he had established a friendship. Herb would leverage camaraderie and connive the unsuspecting target into doing something for him based on a grandiose promise. With Herb, familiarity could breed contempt and friendship could become a double-edged sword.

As we drove from the airport to Media Productions for our meeting, Herb asked me about Dave Meltzer. I admitted I read and subscribed to his newsletter and had talked to him once or twice. When I asked why, he took out the latest issue, which I hadn't read, and showed me a blurb about our meeting. Stuff like that caused Herb to absolutely despise Meltzer; he didn't like his business being written about in the underground press. I wasn't too thrilled either, but I didn't think it was the end of the world.

While Herb was livid and accused me of calling Meltzer myself, I was dumbfounded. There were only three other people who knew that Herb was going to fly in to discuss business: Ron Ratner, Craig Cohen and Luna Vachon. Since Ron didn't know who Dave Meltzer was, that meant either Craig or Luna had the loose lips. While Craig was the one who initially turned me on to the *Wrestling Observer*,

I knew he would never break a confidence, and I also knew he had never spoken to Dave. That could only mean Luna had spoken out of turn, and I assured Herb "whoever disclosed this" would be dealt with appropriately. I think it was then that Herb confided he'd "get even" with Meltzer; he did so by having a jobber named Davey "The Observer" Meltzer at the first UWF television taping in September. I thought it was pretty amusing at the time, but a big waste of energy. I could tell from the start that Herb was the type of person who obsessed over things that meant absolutely nothing to doing business.

When I confronted Luna about Meltzer, she said it was Tom who had contacted Dave, claiming they were childhood friends. Although I knew Luna was full of it, she swore she would never break a confidence again, and I never gave her the opportunity to do so — from that point forward, I shared information with her strictly on a need-to-know basis.

After Ron had given Herb a tour of the facilities, including the soundstage and HDTV editing suite, we adjourned to one of the boardrooms. Like most people who toured the building, Herb was blown away by the hi-def technology, and he realized that a relationship with LMLW meant there could be a relationship with CTN. You could see his wheels spinning, wondering what it would take to shoot the UWF in HD. Having Ron and CTN in my corner gave me a lot of leverage; to a prospective partner, the CTN facilities were the ultimate dog-and-pony show.

Herb immediately tried to position himself in power by directing his questions to Ron instead of to me. Ron cut him off and made it clear that, when it came to wrestling, discussions would be directed to me, not him. Ron also made it clear that any potential relationship between the UWF and CTN would have to flow through LMLW. It caught Herb off guard, something he was obviously not used to, but he adhered to the instruction and redirected his focus.

As we got into the meat and potatoes of the meeting, Herb was very up-front with us about feeling he could compete against McMahon and Turner, provided he had the right business partners. While he thought CTN could be the right partner, he didn't know if LMLW would be, but he was at least willing to explore that prospect. He knew his spot on SportsChannel was coveted, and although it was not his intention to do so, Herb came off a bit arrogant, bragging about how he got on the network without ever having produced anything, something neither Ron nor I wanted to hear. He wasn't willing to give WWOW the green light on the network unless it would directly benefit the UWF, and it became obvious we weren't going to be able to figure that out during this first meeting. Even though Ron and I knew what Herb really wanted in exchange for allowing WWOW to air on SportsChannel — for CTN/Media to step in as the UWF's production partner — we

knew that was probably not going to happen, given that Ron had already gone out on a limb making the deal with me. While Ron and I would later try to figure out a way to make a deal with UWF happen, there was not going to be an answer that day.

Herb also talked openly about his personal disdain for Vince McMahon, claiming that because he used ex-WWF stars Vince had tried to put him out of business. He shared a story about how he had his lawyers send an inquiry letter to Vince about buying Titan Sports just to piss him off. While he knew he was just stirring things up, Herb seemed to enjoy getting under Vince's skin.

As Mick Foley wrote about Herb in *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*: "To know Herb Abrams was to like him, or at least be amused by him, as he was a true cartoon character." When he held a press conference in August to announce the formation of the UWF at a John Arezzi wrestling convention in New York, he announced that Bruiser Brody was the company's booker and Adrian Adonis would be brought in as an active wrestler. Both men were already deceased.

While there was certainly a lot not to like about Herb Abrams, as I would find out in the months and years ahead, he had this never-say-die battling spirit in him, which was not unlike how I perceived myself. Herb's attitude reminded me of a drawing I had once seen on a baseball cap Gordon Solie wore. It was a field mouse giving the middle finger to an eagle that was swooping down on him, and the caption read "The Last Great Act of Defiance." Herb Abrams was that field mouse, and I liked him from that very first meeting.

As the summer closed and we headed into fall, getting on television was becoming more of an uncertainty than ever. While Herb was still trying to leverage my relationship with CTN so he could launch with a superior product, I continued pressing him to give SportsChannel the okay to run an hour of women's wrestling every week. In the meantime, the LMLW business partners were getting restless. I wasn't delivering what I had promised, and from the outside it looked as though we were spinning our wheels. We had to do something to show progress, and so with the understanding that CTN would provide the extra financing, we decided to run a couple of live events.

Instead of trying to book the War Memorial Auditorium again, which I knew was going to be too expensive, Craig helped me choose a couple of more reasonably priced buildings. Locally we chose a place in Pompano Beach called the Multipurpose Educational Center, which was actually the former Pompano Beach High School Gymnasium, and then we chose the Key West High School gym. In keeping with the formula that had worked in Fort Lauderdale, we did the shows as fundraisers, donating a portion of the proceeds. In Pompano Beach our charity was

the Dynamos, a recreation program for the handicapped, while in Key West the school's basketball program was the recipient. With aggressive advertising campaigns set for both towns, we were all set for shows on Friday, November 30th, and Saturday, December 1st.

From a talent perspective, we'd booked a great little crew. Aside from Luna, who was completely healthy and could actually wrestle, we had Penelope Paradise, Malia Hosaka, Pink Cadillac, Rustee Thomas, Peggy Lee Lather, Bambi and Rockin' Robin. We also had a couple of newcomers that included "Dirty" Debbie Drake, who would later gain notoriety wrestling as Debbie Malenko, and Joanne McCartney. Joanne was the 1990 Professional Bodybuilding Association world champion, who got us quite a bit of mainstream press, with mentions in various daily newspapers in addition to *Musclemag International* magazine. Unfortunately, what should have been two great shows turned into a catastrophe that signaled the beginning of the end for LMLW.

The show in Key West was an utter disaster. The ring truck, with me in it, arrived at the building at 8:30 p.m. for an 8 p.m. bell time. I should've known the day was going to be a calamity from the start. It took two hours to get a check from Media to pay for the weekend expenses. There was a miscommunication between Ron and I, and he didn't realize we had to pay everyone in cash rather than by check. Once we hit the road, we were further hampered by the truck's speed governor, which wouldn't allow us to drive over 55 miles per hour. I tried to call the building from the road to let Craig know what was going on, but I couldn't get through. I had made a huge error by not sending the truck ahead of time. By the time we got to the building, we were faced with an angry group of fans. The ring went up in record time — with about 20 people working together to make that happen — but we ended up refunding and upgrading tickets, giving away merchandise and whatever else we could do to keep the folks happy.

To make matters worse, Malia, Bambi and Peggy had missed their connecting flight in Los Angeles because they were too busy having drinks at the airport lounge; they were making their way back east after doing an LPWA TV taping in Laughlin, Nevada. They didn't get to the building until the show was almost over. We had to do some creative maneuvering just to keep the show fresh. Luna was so furious with the three of them that she actually swore revenge. A little over the top perhaps, but she had to direct her anger somewhere. The next night, in Pompano Beach, as punishment for being late, Luna put herself over Bambi in the center of the ring, while Malia laid down for Penelope and Peggy did the clean job for Robin. There was some other craziness going on involving Robin that night, but I'll explain that later.

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Luna Vachon celebrates with the Blackhearts and Rustee Thomas after pinning Bambi

With the double fiasco behind us, I desperately needed to get us back on track. But, I didn't realize how much damage those two shows had caused.

It was the beginning of the month, and CTN was scheduled to provide funding for LMLW to cover our monthly expenses. But instead of being given a check by Ron on Monday morning, he called me into his office and closed the door. I immediately sensed there was a problem. It seemed that CTN had been spending a little bit more than they were supposed to over the past six months, including investments in a couple of projects that went bust, so their board of directors had frozen any expenditures over their normal operating budget. Apparently our agreement fell into that category, and I learned that was partially the reason for the delay in getting the money from Ron on Friday. I didn't realize it, but he had to do a little behind-the-scenes battling to get the cash released. While I immediately began to flush with anxiety, Ron assured me he would try to get approval from the board to get enough money to at least cover our salaries, but he told me that CTN would no longer cover any of our other expenses in hard cash, not even our telephone bill. When I asked Ron why he didn't warn us ahead of time, he admitted that he had thought we would make money on the two shows, which would justify

our funding to the board. The fact we had failed miserably on the heels of the other debacles they had invested in was the straw that broke the camel's back.

When Luna came in for work that day, I immediately sent her home under the guise that there was little for her to do and that I would be tied up with paperwork and phone calls. I didn't want to tell her what was going on, not yet anyway. I spent the rest of the day speaking to some of my key business partners, and Bruce Harris assured me that, in a worst-case scenario, he and some of the other partners would help cover Luna's salary for the remainder of the month. He convinced me to hold tight pending what Ratner would come back with from the CTN board; he didn't want me to unnecessarily rile up Luna. I had my own financial problems staring me in the face. I knew all too well what it was like to not have enough money to pay my bills, and I didn't want to go through that again. I especially didn't want to face my wife, Sharon, with yet another failed venture.

Looking back, this situation was not only grinding my nerves but gnawing at my spirit, and little by little I could feel things slipping away from me. I wish I could say that the CTN board came through with continued financing, but that didn't happen. To make matters worse, an explosion was about to rock our offices, triggered by a five foot six hurricane named Luna Vachon.

I think it was Craig who said it best, when he told me that dealing with Luna, who suffered from bipolar disorder, would always be like walking on eggshells. Most of the time it was Gertrude (Trudy) Hurd, not Luna Vachon, who came to work. When she was calm, Angel, as both Dick Slater and later Tom Nash called her, was a sweetheart. She answered the phones professionally. She was cordial to me and the people around us. She acted like anyone in their right mind would act. I never gave much thought as to why this woman, who had been married to someone else prior to living with Slater, did not have her two children, Joshua and Van, living with her. Was it the drugs? Was it the alcohol? Was it the wrestling lifestyle? All of the above? Maybe it was the fact that when things didn't go right for Angel she turned into a real-life She-Hulk.

Kevin Sullivan once told me he knew exactly what he was doing when he gave Angel the wrestling name Luna. Two years my junior, Luna was born into the world of wrestling as the daughter of Paul "Butcher" Vachon and the niece of Maurice "Mad Dog" and ladies' legend Vivian Vachon. Despite her entire family trying to discourage her from getting into the business, she was determined to make a mark for herself in the industry, with the added challenge of changing the perception of ladies' wrestling. One of the main reasons she came on board with our project was that we wanted to make ladies' wrestling as respected and taken as seriously as it was in Japan.

Everything came to a head on this particular workday. Luna had been dropped off at the office by Tom, who worked during the day as an electrician, so when I got in she was already minding the store. Aside from answering the phones, she occupied her time by coming up with ideas for our next set of television shows. As soon as I walked into the building, I could sense things were amiss. It was still early in the morning, but people looked as if someone had died. Before I even made it down the hall to my office, Ron lassoed me into his and closed the door. This was not a good sign.

As he sat behind his desk, he appeared somewhat defeated. I knew their board meeting had gone into the late hours of the night because when I left the building at almost eight o'clock they were still locked behind closed doors. There was a lot more at stake in that meeting than just the future of LMLW, but I was only concerned about what directly affected me. While I should have been more understanding and sympathetic to what the net effect would be for everyone — people who I had come to consider friends as well as colleagues, including Ron — I was not. I could tell from the way he carried himself that what he was about to tell me was eating at his insides, but his hands were tied. At first he didn't say a word; he just sat there staring at me. He finally shook his head, and before he said the words I didn't want to hear — and he didn't want to say — I snapped at him.

"This is bullshit," I said, standing up. "Now what the hell do I do?"

"Sorry," was all he could say. And really what more could he offer?

Ron could have been a cold, hard-hearted prick about it, considering he was being skewered by the CTN board, but he wasn't. Instead, I was being the asshole. I knew the end was coming, but I was not looking forward to it, nor was I willing to just throw in the towel.

After saying something foolishly threatening, if not childish — "If I don't get a check from you on Friday, I'm coming back in here and taking no prisoners!" — Ron told me to calm down and that he would help me try to figure something out. I didn't want to hear that.

Ticked off, I stormed out of his office and marched down the hall toward mine. I wanted to turn around and say something else, but I knew I had said too much already. I was so frustrated at my inability to do anything that I felt I was going to burst. The skin at my temples tightened, and when I found Luna already in the office, I bit my lip, hoping my frustration would quickly subside. But Luna would have to be deaf not to have heard my exchange with Ron, and she immediately knew something was off kilter. Any attempt at a poker face was forfeited as I allowed my emotions to get the best of me.

"What was that all about?"

"We're screwed," I said.

Luna was confused. From her perspective everything was peachy, as we had just done the two shows. The crowds could have been better, but it wasn't the end of the world. Since I had shielded her from the latest financial woes, she didn't have a clue what was happening. When she pressed me, I ignored her. Instead, I picked up the phone and called Bruce. I didn't care if Luna listened in or not because my business was unraveling before me and I couldn't do a damn thing to stop it.

"I just spoke with Ron."

"And?" he asked.

"They said no."

"We'll need to go back to some of the partners to see if we can get some of the expenses covered. Do you at least have enough in the bank to pay Luna?"

"I do"

"Well, when she comes in explain to her what's going on and give her two weeks' salary. If the account is short, I'll cover it personally."

"Well, she's here now."

"Does she know what's going on?"

"No. What should I do?"

"Give her a check and tell her we'll regroup in a couple of weeks with an update to see where things stand. For now Friday will be her last day. Even if we pull the plug we'll cover her for the whole month — it's important that she has money for the holidays. Just be honest with her."

"Okay. So I guess I'll give her a check and I'll let her know Friday will be her last day . . ."

Since Luna only heard my side of the conversation with Bruce, all she heard was: "I just spoke with Ron. . . . They said no. . . . I do. . . . Well, she's here now. . . . No. What should I do? . . . Okay. So I guess I'll give her a check and I'll let her know Friday will be her last day . . ."

"I knew it," she began yelling at me. "I knew I was going to get fucked!"

"What's going on?" Bruce asked. He could hear Luna ranting. "Tell her to calm down and explain that we'll take care of her for the month."

"Let me call you back," I said, hanging up the phone. But before I could say or explain anything to Luna, she fired a barrage of foul language at me.

"I should've known better than to trust you!" she yelled at the top of her lungs, her nose wrinkling with anger. "It's the same old story. I should've just walked in here ass-backwards with a jar of Vaseline in my hands so at least when you fucked me, it wouldn't have hurt so bad!"

"Luna," I tried explaining, "Just calm down."

"Fuck you!" she continued as she began gathering her things, "I'm not calming down. You sold me out in two seconds. I heard what you said."

"You didn't hear both ends of the conversation," I tried explaining. But how do you reason with a lunatic?

"I heard all I need to hear. It's the same old story," she barked and then got right in my face, nose-to-nose with me. "I might as well have been giving you blow jobs because I'm nothing but a sucker for believing you!"

With that Luna turned from me and stormed out of the office. I tried calling after her, but she kept walking. I followed her down to the end of the hall, but despite my calling out for her to wait, she kept right on going. Since I knew she didn't have a ride home, I went downstairs. When I walked out of the building, I saw that she had taken off down the road on foot. I called out to her, but she didn't bother turning around. Her house had to be a good four or five miles from where we were.

I was so upset — not only at how things had deteriorated so fast, but because Luna did not give me the benefit of the doubt. Here I was making sure she would be covered for the whole month knowing full well I would be bringing home nothing myself, and it was like she spat in my face.

Could the day possibly get any worse?

When I walked back into the building, I was met with several pairs of piercing eyes. I didn't say a word and went back up to my office and closed the door. I made two phone calls, one to Bruce and one to Craig, filling them both in on what had just gone down. Just as I was hanging up the phone with Craig there was a knock on the door. It was Ron.

He came in and told me that because of all the yelling they had lost a client who was in the editing suite, which was right below my office. He told me that Luna would not be allowed back in the building and that, while I was an adult and could make my own decisions, I should discontinue my "relationship" with her. Apparently the argument and her sexually descriptive comments were taken out of context and misinterpreted. When I assured Ron there was nothing physical going on between Luna and I and the blow up had to do with the cuts to our finances, he said he understood where the anger was coming from but restated his position about Luna, saying the offices were still a place of business and not a wrestling locker room.

For the most part I stayed in the office and made phone calls, trying to come up with alternate financing. I called everyone I knew and even called Herb, trying to convince him to at least let the four shows we had in the can on SportsChannel

to generate a cash flow, but he again snubbed the idea. Hours passed and there was no luck in the money generating department; I decided to call it a day. Just as I was ready to leave, Luna came back to the office, this time with Tom Nash and Dave Heath at her side. She had come back to get some personal items she had left behind and to take some of the talent files we had stored, mostly photos and nothing I couldn't replace.

In my attempt to walk on eggshells, I told her that she had been way out of line and that instead of being pissed at me and causing a scene, she should have at least listened to what I had to say. Although she was a lot calmer than earlier and didn't raise her voice, I could sense she still had all this pent up anger that could explode at any time. Tom and Dave shot me this knowing look behind her back as if to say they knew what I was dealing with.

As she took her last file, for the first time that day I heard Angel do the talking instead of Luna.

"Now what am I going to do?" she asked in a very reserved and somewhat cracked voice. "Christmas is right around the corner and I have nothing. I won't even be able to give my boys a gift this year."

With that I handed her an envelope. I had planned to drop it off at her house on my way home. When she opened it, her eyes started to glisten. She was emotional but didn't cry. Inside the envelope was a check to cover her for the entire month. Luna looked toward me and softly said, "Thank you." She couldn't even look me in the eye. It was okay. I understood.

Deep down I knew why she was so emotional, and it had nothing to do with being paid or not being paid for Christmas. Her anger had nothing to do with being screwed or not. That's why I chased after her when she walked out of my office and out of the building in a huff. While others might look at my actions and say I was being weak for kowtowing to her, I was trying to be compassionate. I realized that when she heard me say that Friday was to be her last day, it signaled that our failure was eminent. That something we both wanted to succeed for very different reasons was coming to an abrupt end. Everything she said to me is how I felt about the situation too. I just didn't explode as violently as she did. I snapped at Ron, and she wigged out on me.

All the warning signs were there, but we didn't pay attention to them. The paycheck represented the finality of it.

I told Luna I would update her in a couple of weeks, but we both knew what was going to happen. When she and the boys left the office, I sat there for a while just staring at the walls and gathered my thoughts, wondering what would be next for me. What was I going to say to my wife when I got home? There were a mil-

lion things that went through my mind at that point, and none was positive.

After finally deciding to leave the office and face the inevitable at home, I gathered my belongings. As I walked down the staircase leading to the lobby, I saw one of the CTN executives removing the Ladies Major League Wrestling name from the glass door at the building entrance with a razor blade.

How fitting.

Even though I still had an office in the building, his action spoke volumes about what the future was going to hold for us.

The saying "It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings" comes from the final scene of the opera *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods), the finale of four epic musical dramas by the German composer Richard Wagner. Brünnhilde, dressed like a Norse valkyrie, with long blonde braids, a horned helmet and holding a spear and shield, sings an aria at a funeral.

While I should have interpreted the removal of our name from the door as the proverbial fat lady, I refused to admit that LMLW was dead. I was still willing to fight hard for my vision.

Baseball great Yogi Berra once said, "It ain't over until it's over." But as 1990 came to a close, Yogi, it was over. I just didn't want to believe it.

Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood.
— Helen Keller (1880–1968)

EIGHT

RUNNING ON EMPTY

GEORGE NAPOLITANO

The UWF's colorful owner, Herb Abrams, interviews his future champ Steve "Dr. Death" Williams

Good judgment comes from experience, and often experience comes from bad judgment.
— Rita Mae Brown (1944–)

As promising as 1990 had been when the New Year rang in, that was how bleak the prospect of 1991 seemed. The only steady income my wife, Sharon, and I had was from her retail job. Yet we still had a spark, and, despite my struggles, she still supported my goal of running a successful wrestling company.

But how long would it be before her patience ran out?

By the beginning of March, with no real money coming in, we were forced to

move in with her parents. We went from a nice, spacious three-bedroom 1,800-square-foot apartment on a golf course to a guest room in a house that was about 600 square feet smaller than where we had been. Aside from our clothes and two cats, everything else went into storage.

Down for the count but not beaten, I got back to work and tried to salvage the remnants of LMLW. But no matter what I did, I was met with unenthusiastic candor. The partners were not willing to put up any additional money, neither Bruce Harris nor Dan Druckman had any new potential investors in the wings and while CTN was still interested in partnering with us, Ron Ratner's hands were tied. He did try again to leverage his relationship with Ray Bennett to see if Turner had changed its position and would back us. They hadn't.

I reached out to Herb Abrams, but this time rather than pitching him the idea of getting SportsChannel to air the WWOW shows, I called to see if he wanted to buy into LMLW.

The offer caught him a little off guard. Up to that point I had been dealing from a position of strength, with CTN as a bargaining chip. But now, with CTN no longer providing that financial stability, Herb immediately seized the upper hand. During that conversation I offered to sell him what amounted to CTN's portion of our proposed joint venture since it was now obvious CTN was not going to put anything further into the company. But Herb didn't go for the offer, telling me he needed to concentrate strictly on the UWF brand and that if he were to start a ladies' division, he didn't need me or any of my partners. It was a devastating thing to hear, but he was right. Without a television production company behind us, we were just another wrestling company — one with no assets and a lot of debt. However, that wasn't the end of my dealings with Herb. After he delivered that "I don't need you" speech, he did something that caught me by surprise. He offered me a job.

Although we had met only that one time, Herb had taken a liking to me, and the feeling was mutual. I don't know if it was because we were both ex–New Yorkers or both Jewish or because we both attempted to do something that was against all odds. Whatever it was, we seemed to hit it off.

The offer was simple: Herb wanted to expand his operation to include Florida after successfully moving his television tapings from the Reseda Country Club in Reseda, California (a small community about 20 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles), to the Penta Hotel in New York, and he wanted to leverage my knowledge of the market. Even though he had several wrestlers on his roster who lived in Florida — B. Brian Blair, Paul Orndorff and Greg Valentine to name a few — he didn't have a promoter for the area.

Although this wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I called him, it was a

means to an end and at least temporarily gave me an income. With Herb having a television taping scheduled for Universal Studios on Sunday afternoon, April 7th, I booked the War Memorial Auditorium in Fort Lauderdale for the night before and suggested local talent for both the live and taped events.

It was at this time that Herb put me in contact with the person he described as his right-hand man and booker, Lenny Duge. Herb booked the top of the card himself, and Lenny was responsible for producing the show, booking the vast majority of the undercard and figuring out a way to incorporate that talent into what Herb wanted presented on UWF TV. Not necessarily an easy task.

It was also around this time that Bob Roop and Dr. Red Roberts temporarily came back into the picture. Through some of the wrestlers Bob had learned that I was working with Herb, and he and Red wanted me to arrange a meeting. Although I was somewhat reluctant because my relationship with Herb was still relatively new, I put a meeting together for the day of the show.

I had arranged a combination of free and discounted hotel rooms for Herb and his UWF crew at the same hotel I had used the year before when booking the WWOW TV show. I arrived early for the meeting, and I had a chance to prep Herb for the meeting before Bob and Red arrived. Even though Bob and Red were my friends, my responsibility was to be loyal to Herb since he had been paying me for the last six weeks.

As we waited for Bob and Red by the hotel swimming pool, I got a chance to meet and speak with Colonel DeBeers and John Tolos for the first time, when they came by to say good morning to Herb.

DeBeers, whose real name is Ed Wiskoski, was a little on the quiet side. I had met him briefly nine or ten years earlier on the same day I met with Gordon Solie for the first time. Gordon had me sit off to the side and out of camera range, but when Wiskoski came out to speak with Gordon before the show started, the Dean introduced me to Derek Draper, a fairly new wrestler to the area. When I recounted the story to DeBeers, he kind of smiled and said I had "a hell of a memory." I couldn't tell if he was happy or upset that someone had remembered his old gimmick, but, with that comment, he got up and excused himself.

John was one of my all-time favorite heels and a hell of a nice guy. Being a bit of a mark, I told Tolos about watching him years earlier at Madison Square Garden against Victor Rivera. He had taken a bump from the top rope and landed squarely on top of his head, only to stagger to his feet and finish the match. I told him it was at that point that I turned to my brother and said, "I don't know about the rest of the card, but that was real!"

Tolos smiled broadly. "I was good, wasn't I?"

"You're damn right you were!"

Before long Bob and Red showed up, and with them were two businessmen — one was Steve Heller. They made their money trading currency in the foreign exchange (forex) market. Although Heller and his partner came across like old friends of Bob and Red, Heller had actually reached out to Bob by writing him a letter when he was still with Global. Heller's colleague seemed to be more of a silent associate in the partnership, as he hardly said a word.

After all the introductions, Heller took the lead and pitched Herb on running live events across the Caribbean and leveraging the UWF television show to do it. Heller and his partner had been trying to execute the idea since Global had gone out of business but could never get legs on the project. While Bob and Red probably would have loved to use the old GWA tapes, they couldn't at the time because of the on-going legal issues. Oddly, the business model Heller pitched was almost identical to what Global had been under the leadership of Patrick Schaefer. Heller and his partner wanted to run shows in places like Jamaica, Curacao, Aruba, Bonaire, St. Martin, St. Thomas and the Cayman Islands. They felt they could not only make money at the box office, but they could turn additional profits by trading the currency on the forex. They didn't want money from Herb; they wanted to put his show on TV in the area and then book the UWF talent for the live shows, paying Herb a fee to do so.

While Herb said he liked the concept, he wouldn't commit to the idea and said he would have to think about it. In the meantime he invited the foursome to the show that evening as his guests. Even though it really would have been a great deal for Herb to do because it would have expanded the perception of the UWF, not to mention given him additional cash flow for the licensing of the program, Herb eventually balked. I'm not sure why he turned down the deal, but I would venture to guess that at some point his ego got in the way.

After the meeting I walked with Herb back to his hotel room, where he introduced me to Murry Abrams. Like her husband, Mrs. Abrams was a piece of work. Although Herb introduced her to me as Murry Wong Abrams of the "Hong Kong Wongs" — as though she were from a royal line — what stood before looked more like a hooker than royalty. Murry was a strikingly attractive, thin Asian woman with high cheekbones and long black hair. Picture a Lucy Liu type. But she was chewing gum like a cow while smoking a cigarette and that made her come across like she was something else entirely. I vividly recall her sucking deeply on her cancer stick and then right afterward blowing a bubble. When the bubble popped, smoke escaped. If it had been my wife, I would have been embarrassed, but I suppose Herb liked that about Murry. As I would find out soon enough, Herb loved hookers.

The show in Fort Lauderdale was pretty awful attendance-wise, drawing a little more than 400 paid; Herb didn't believe in giving away any tickets. Considering there were several names on the card that were still considered decent draws, guys like DeBeers, Blair, Bam Bam Bigelow and Bob Orton Jr., the first UWF show in Fort Lauderdale should have drawn at least twice what it did. The problem was, as was usually was the case with Herb, he hardly put any advertising dollars where they were needed. Despite some last-minute radio interviews Lou Albano did to promote the show, even though he wasn't going to be at the event, Herb ignored my suggested advertising campaign and, for the most part, promoted off of his weekly SportsChannel TV show. He did do some fringe advertising as well, taking two weeks of spots on local WWF broadcasts and having me distribute about 2,000 flyers through my contact at Domino's Pizza. What was truly odd to me was that Herb seemed happy with the attendance.

Aside from Herb's core group of workers, the card itself featured a lot of local talent that I was instrumental in getting booked. There was also an incident about a month before the show that almost got me into hot water with Rusty Brooks. During a phone conversation with Lenny, I suggested several workers for the two cards. One of them, Mike Kirshner, who had limited success in the WWF as Corporal Kirshner and later in Global as Colonel Kirshner, would reprise his original military rank and be thrown right into the mix of things with former AWA and WWF midcarder Boris Zhukov.

Then, as a testament to my loyalty to those who had worked for me previously, and probably because I felt a little guilty that LMLW had come to an abrupt end, I was also able to get Luna booked, as well as Tom Nash and Dave Heath (the Blackhearts).

For the rest of the guys, I suggested Lenny contact both Larry Malenko and Rusty Brooks. While he had already spoken to Malenko through Blair, in an attempt to save time, Lenny had me make a three-way call to get Rusty on the line. He figured I could do the introduction and then he could tell Rusty how many people he needed. When I called Rusty we got his answering machine. I did a quick introduction and then Lenny left a detailed message. When we were through, I disconnected Rusty's line and we continued talking. Or at least I thought I disconnected Rusty's line.

In one of the biggest gaffes of all time, with Rusty's answering machine recording our conversation, Lenny began verbally slamming Rusty, asking me if his guys were any good because he felt Rusty was only a jobber — and a horrible worker at that. With no provocation whatsoever, Lenny said all these inflammatory things. Luckily I spoke up for Rusty, defending both his in-ring abilities and his success as a trainer and gave Lenny my word that Rusty would come through. That

night when Rusty called me, I thought I was going to die. Luckily he thought that the call was a rib, and he thanked me for getting him and some of his students booked.

Right after the show, a group of us drove from Fort Lauderdale to Orlando for the television tapings. In the car with me were Craig, Bruce Owens and Joe Popejoy, who did most of the driving. In addition to getting some of the wrestlers booked, Lenny had me book two referees, so I made sure Bruce and Joe, who were both regulars from when Craig and I ran shows, got paydays. Since Lenny also needed two floor managers to work the Gorilla position, I worked one spot and Craig got the other.

The day started out strangely and got progressively stranger. Instead of including the wrestling show as part of admission to the theme park, Herb struck a deal to sell his own tickets. While that might have been a good idea in principle, there was no way people who were going to the park would want to see wrestling unless they knew about the show ahead of time, and, like in Fort Lauderdale, Herb's advertising was limited. Also, instead of doing the show in a nice, cool sound studio, he chose to do an outdoor show. But instead of doing it in the evening, when it might be somewhat bearable, Herb did it in the blistering Florida sun. Then he had his mother working the ticket window. . . . And when I asked him why, he said she was the only person he could trust with the box office money. Right out of the station the show had "train wreck" written all over it, and they drew only about 250 fans. By the time the show was over, there were 100 left in their seats.

To make matters worse, their videotape stock hadn't arrived, and if they didn't get it by bell time the taping would have to be canceled. It seemed Herb had a falling out with his production supplier and never informed his producer, so Lenny had to do some last-minute scrambling to pull off the shoot.

Herb, meanwhile, was not feeling well. Supposedly he and some of the wrestlers — DeBeers, Bigelow and others — had been up nearly all night partying. One of the wrestlers mentioned that they had stopped at several strip clubs on the way to Orlando and had thrown back a few too many. Another one of the wrestlers claimed that somebody slipped Herb a Mickey. Whatever it was, he walked around in a fog.

My job for the day was fairly easy. I got to work from a spot inside the trailer that served as the babyface dressing room, while Craig, unfortunately, worked outdoors, just outside the heel trailer. As we were both on headsets, we were able to talk to each other, as well as communicate with Lenny who was in the production truck with the show's director, Mark Stolberger.

When DeBeers was supposed to go out for his first scheduled match, he claimed he had scratched his eye the night before and couldn't work because his vision was blurred. To me he looked hungover like Herb. Stolberger made light of DeBeers's condition and claimed that he scratched his cornea on a loose nipple.

Both Craig and I had our share of inappropriate moments that nearly got us both in trouble. I stuck my foot in my mouth when Lenny told me to "send out the jobber" for one of the matches. I didn't know who that was because the production sheet I had simply said "Jobber," so I said, "Okay jobber, head out to the ring!"

I heard Lenny say, "Oh, geez!" over the headset, and nearly every pair of eyes in the dressing room looked my way. I realized I had screwed up. Bigelow slowly walked over to me and very discreetly and quietly told me not to call them "jobbers" because it was disrespectful, even though that's what their role was. I never made that error again.

As the day progressed, the show became more and more muddled, and while we were on a break Craig said over the headsets, "I've never seen such a disorganized show in my life. They haven't got a clue." Craig thought he had pressed the button to speak only to me, but everyone heard the comment.

Lenny flipped out: "Who said that?"

Neither Craig nor I answered.

He repeated himself: "Who said that?"

Again, neither of us responded. I saw Craig take off his headset and walk away from his spot.

"Howard," Lenny repeated yet again, "Who the fuck said that?"

I played dumb: "What are you talking about?"

"Who just said we haven't got a clue?"

I wasn't about to rat out Craig: "I have no idea."

"Was that Craig?"

"No," I lied, but then I tried to justify: "He's not even out there. It looks like maybe he went to the bathroom or something."

"Well, who the hell is out there by his headset?" Lenny pressed, knowing I could see the position from my spot in the trailer.

When I looked again, there were several wrestlers walking back and forth, but a few were standing right where the headset had been placed on the ground. "There are a bunch of guys back there," I said.

"Okay, but who is standing closest to the headset?"

I didn't want to answer him because I didn't want the wrong person to get in trouble. "Kirshner," I finally said, answering him truthfully as Mike was standing

literally right on top of the headset. "But you can't blame him," I added. "Unless somebody specifically saw him say something. You can't blame him."

Although he was pretty pissed off and threw around some very descriptive expletives, Lenny finally dropped the subject, and the show went on uninterrupted except for a couple of minor backstage confrontations. Right in the middle of the show, Steve Ray, who was one of the few non-named wrestlers that Herb insisted on pushing because they were friends, switched the angle of one of the matches he and his tag team partner, Sonny Beach, were working. The switch caused confusion not only for Bruno Sammartino and Craig DeGeorge, who were calling the match, but for the director as well. It made for bad television. Lenny blew a gasket and confronted Steve in a production trailer off to the side, and if not for Herb intervening, they probably would have come to blows. Then, within maybe an hour of that fiasco, Herb got into it with Rick Bassman. Rick represented several wrestlers at the time, including a six-foot-seven 325-pound muscular African-American monster named Greg Boyd, who wrestled under the name the Myth. Boyd, who was scheduled to work TV — and worked the night before in Fort Lauderdale — was to be involved in a race-related angle with DeBeers similar to what DeBeers had previously done while in the AWA. Since DeBeers couldn't wrestle because of the eye injury, there was no longer a spot for Boyd. Bassman, however, wanted to make sure his guy got paid anyway, and he should have been, but Herb refused. During the ensuing argument, Lenny came to Herb's aid, and with the help of park security, Bassman and Boyd were both escorted away from the backstage area.

Even with all that nonsense going on and the fact that the show was a complete bust, there was a real highlight for me: meeting and talking with Lou Albano face-to-face for the first time after having spoken with him so many times on the telephone.

I did do a little behind-the-scenes politicking to protect one of the guys I booked on that show. One of the last matches on the card was scheduled to be a six-man tag team bout with Bigelow, Blair and Paul Orndorff facing DeBeers, Zhukov and Bob Orton Jr., and Bigelow penciled in to pin Zhukov. With DeBeers unable to participate, Rusty took the South African colonel's place, and I was instructed by Lenny to tell them to switch the finish so that Rusty would do the job instead of Zhukov. Considering that Rusty had already done two jobs earlier in the day for both Bigelow and Blair, I conveniently neglected to tell the three babyfaces about the switch as they went to the ring, so Zhukov did the job as originally planned. I caught a little heat over it from both Herb and Lenny, but it really didn't matter because Zhukov's role was not much different than Rusty's on that

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Posing backstage with Captain Lou Albano at a UWF TV taping

day, and while Zhukov might have had a little higher profile than Rusty, I wasn't about to let the guy I got booked be treated like a second-class worker.

A few weeks after the show, Herb mentioned that he was looking for a location for the UWF's first pay-per-view. He initially wanted to do it in New York, but he couldn't get into a facility that was larger than the Penta Hotel, where he had shot most of his television. When I asked him why he wanted a larger facility, questioning his ability to draw, he said he needed an arena with at least 3,500 seats because that was the commitment he had given to clear the PPV, so it couldn't be done in a ballroom. When I told him I had done research on a number of buildings, he asked me if I would continue working with him. I told him as long as he continued paying me, I would continue working with him. I sent him information on a number of buildings, including the one that I thought would be best suited for what he wanted, the Odeum Sports and Expo Center in Villa Park, Illinois, near Chicago. Herb decided to go with the Manatee Civic Center in Palmetto, Florida, near St. Petersburg, because he felt I would be better able to promote a building closer to where I lived.

Although I sent him the Florida facility as an option, I strongly suggested he forego it because, even scaled back, I felt the building was too large for his promotion and explained that even WCW had problems drawing there. However, when Herb learned from the building manager that a local promoter by the name of Henry Raines ran a group called Suncoast Wrestling and drew a few hundred people regularly, he ignored the warning and thought with the names he was bringing in he would draw a big house.

A few weeks before the June 9th *Beach Brawl* PPV, Herb decided to hold a press conference at the Manatee Civic Center to unveil the new UWF Sports-Channel TV title belt and the participants for the main event — Bigelow and Steve "Dr. Death"

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

Paul Orndorff and Bam Bam Bigelow were WWF mainstays before joining the UWF

Williams, who ironically was Bill Watts's UWF champion before Watts sold his territory to Crockett.

Despite sending out a horde of press releases to the local newspapers, radio stations and television stations, only two members of the press showed up to cover the event. Herb was pissed and blamed me. Luckily some members of the wrestling community were there at my urging, including Greg Solie, Gordon's stepson, who had been a director for the WWF on their international broadcasts and who I was trying to get Herb to hire. Greg and others asked pointed questions to Bigelow and Williams, all for the sake of two members of the press and the camera that was taping for SportsChannel.

After the presser a despondent Herb took Bam Bam and Doc back to Tampa in the limo he had hired for the day and told me to meet him back at the hotel. Lenny drove with me. Lenny knew I had done everything I could to get people to the building, and he kept telling me not to worry about Herb, that he just had a bruised ego and everything would be fine. Lenny then asked me if I thought the arena would draw 5,000 people, as Herb believed it would, and when I told him there was no way in hell, he asked, "Why is Herb running the building then?" I told Lenny to ask his boss.

As the long day turned into evening, we converged at the hotel, and Herb, Bam Bam, Doc, a guy named Ed Barbar and a few female escorts piled into the back of the limo. There wasn't enough room in the back for me, so I had to sit up front with the driver. Lenny knew it was Herb's way of trying to punish me for the lack of coverage, but I would soon find out there was another reason why he didn't want me sitting in the back. Feeling I was unfairly slighted, Lenny sat up front with me. Herb took everyone to dinner at a somewhat upscale Italian restaurant in Tampa called Donatello.

Brian Blair met the group at the restaurant, and there seemed to be several conversations going on at the same time — everything from serious business to general chitchat. Food and wine flowed freely, and even though I came from a family of big eaters, I had never seen anyone pack it away like Bigelow that night. I remember him eating a whole plate of calamari by himself and not one but two main courses.

During dinner one of the escorts got up from her seat and made her way to Herb. When she leaned over to whisper in his ear, he became very guarded and wouldn't let her get too close. He then told his companion for the night to go to the ladies' room and rinse off her perfume and wipe off her lipstick. It seemed Herb had a disdain for such things.

When dinner finally wrapped up and Herb was presented with the thousand-dollar-plus tab, he paid the bill with his Diners Club card. What happened next was my first true glimpse of the type of person Herb Abrams really was.

As our group was walking out, Herb was on his cell reporting his card stolen. He thought nothing of ripping off his credit card company. Some crooks will rob you with a loaded gun. Herb did it with his smile and demeanor.

Outside the restaurant Lenny shot me a knowing look, as if to say this was what he had to put up with all the time. I was ready to call it a night, but no such luck. As Herb continued going through the motions with the credit card company off to the side, Bam Bam, Doc, Ed Barbar and the girls got into the limo. Lenny and I waited for Herb before squeezing back onto the front seat with the driver. While we waited, a white sports car pulled up to the curb in front of Donatello, and the driver, who was wearing dark glasses, was looking for Herb. I immediately recognized the passenger as John Laurinaitis (Johnny Ace), and it turned out the driver was Tom Zenk. As I found out later, the Z-Man was looking to score some coke, and it seemed Herb was all too happy to provide him with the white powder.

Once we were all back in the limo, Herb hurled a final insult at me by closing the privacy window between the front seat and the back cab while I was talking to him. I heard Bam Bam and Herb start to laugh as the window was closing. I got hot and turned to Lenny: "I don't need this bullshit. Just take me back to the hotel." Lenny instructed the driver to do so, but first we had another stop to make.

The limo pulled up to a nice home in a plush Tampa neighborhood. It was Ed Barbar's place. Herb, Doc, Bam Bam and Ed got out of the back and left the girls inside. Herb instructed Lenny and I to come into the house with them. When I told Herb I would wait in the car and didn't appreciate how I was being treated, he apologized and said he was only kidding around and that I shouldn't be so serious and should learn to relax. He reiterated that I should go inside. Reluctantly I got

out of the limo and followed them into the house.

Lenny, apparently knowing why we'd stopped at Ed's, started getting upset and told Herb he didn't want to be part of his "little party." Herb told Lenny the same thing he told me.

Ed Barbar was instrumental in helping Herb finance his PPV. Brian Blair had introduced Ed to Herb. Ed was a customer at the Gold's Gym Brian owned, and he was a big wrestling fan who wanted to invest money in the business. Since Herb was being loyal to Brian, the introduction was Brian's way of trying to help Herb out. Although Ed put some money behind Herb, Ed in turn introduced Herb to a fellow named Tom Kenny. Tom owned a big telecommunications switching company in the Tampa area, and he actually bankrolled *Beach Brawl*.

When Ed came back into the room, he had two small plastic bags with him. In one bag was marijuana. In the other was cocaine. Bam Bam grabbed the bag with the pot, and when he opened it, he inhaled deeply. "This is some good shit," he said. He immediately went to work rolling a couple of joints.

Ed, meanwhile, thought nothing of taking the coke out of the second bag and pouring it onto a mirror. Ed let Doc have first dibs.

Steve took a playing card and separated the small pile of white powder into several even lines and then, using a cut straw that Ed had handed to him, snorted the cocaine up one of his nostrils and then up the other. He passed the straw to Herb.

Herb lowered his head to the mirror and snorted aggressively. After he was finished, he raised his head from its bent position and squeezed his nose closed with his thumb and forefinger, ensuring that he would get the full effect of the cocaine.

Bam Bam passed on the coke and lit up the joint he had just rolled.

Ed went last.

"Can we get the hell out of here now?" Lenny asked, visibly upset. He obviously didn't like being around the stuff any more than I did.

By no means was I a prude; I'd been around plenty of people who did drugs while I was in high school and college. But this guy I was working for doing hardcore drugs right in front of me, combined with these two larger-than-life wrestlers doing the stuff too, it just didn't sit right.

"Okay," Herb smirked. Then turning to Ed said, "Let's take these two back to the hotel," referring to Lenny and me.

I can't tell you how many times I have replayed that night in my head throughout the years. It truly was everything that was wrong with the wrestling business. I swore to myself that I would never be like that.

Good or bad, there was always something going on when you were with Herb — so after that night, I kept my distance from him. But because I really needed

the money, I swallowed my pride, turned a blind eye to the crap he was doing and continued working for him.

By the middle of May, Herb was firming up his PPV lineup. When he asked me to recommend a couple of women he could use to crown a UWF ladies' champ, I suggested Candi Devine and Rockin' Robin, feeling they would match up well. Candi had been the AWA ladies' champion and had a lot of television experience, which is why I used her the previous year when putting together WWOW TV, and Robin had been the WWF ladies' champion, which of course Herb loved.

As the June PPV approached, Herb decided to add a second show in Fort Lauderdale on the preceding Friday. Once again there was no advertising budget to speak of, so ticket sales for the show at the War Memorial were soft. To make matters worse, as I predicted, tickets were not moving for the show at the Manatee Civic Center. It seemed unavoidable — Herb's premiere PPV event was going to play to an empty arena, and who was going to take the blame?

You guessed it.

The Friday night show in Fort Lauderdale drew less than 250 and was marred by an in-ring altercation between Tom Nash of the Blackhearts and Brady Boone, who was doing his Firecat gimmick. Tom was a bit stiff with Brady and tried pawning it off on Dave Heath, who immediately set the record straight backstage. When Brady confronted Tom in the dressing room, Tom tried backpedaling and cowered from the confrontation. Brady wanted to wring his neck, but Tom wouldn't go for the bait. By not standing up for himself in front of the other wrestlers, Tom lost what little respect he had from the rest of the boys.

When I asked Herb what time he wanted me in Palmetto for Sunday's PPV, he told me there was no need for me to be there and that I shouldn't plan to go. It bothered me . . . a lot. I felt Herb was blaming me for his own incompetence and stubbornness; the PPV itself drew a little more than 500 for a building that was set up for 5,000. Had he listened to me and done the PPV in Chicago, as I suggested, he would have had a much better crowd.

To add insult to my injury, Herb also stiffed me on my pay for the month. Not only was he supposed to compensate me for my time, he was supposed to reimburse me for the numerous phone calls I had made on his behalf to get the building for the PPV, plus reimburse me for all the printing I had done for him for both Fort Lauderdale and Palmetto. He knew I had no other income, and he thought nothing of putting me on the hook for his expenses.

A couple of days after the PPV, Herb called to see if I would promote his July Fort Lauderdale show. He told me he shouldn't have blamed me for the poor attendance of the last show or *Beach Brawl*, claiming he was under a lot of stress, and

he said he would make it up to me. When I questioned him about the money he owed me, he said he would square everything with me on July 20th, the night of the show. Fool that I was, I once again promoted a show for him. I needed the money badly and, despite warnings from both Sharon and Craig, decided to give Herb one more chance.

Although the show was better attended than the last one, drawing about 300, Herb cried poor at the end of the evening and told me he was going to have to send me a check when he got back to Beverly Hills. I knew right then and there I was being screwed, and Herb knew there wasn't a darn thing I could do about it. He got the best of me, and it ripped my heart out.

Figuring this was the last of my dealings with Herb and probably wrestling as a whole, I tried to walk away from the business. My continuing failure was gnawing at my insides. I searched for real a job to help pay the bills but came up empty. Although I went to many interviews, it seemed I was either underqualified or overqualified, and on the rare occasion that an offer came my way, I always made some type of excuse to turn the job down. Sharon was growing impatient.

I tried calling Herb to get my money, but he avoided me. I found myself calling Lenny to see what he could do, but, while he would show compassion, he really had no say or control in the UWF's finances. I didn't know it at the time, but Lenny himself was owed quite a bit.

Knowing I desperately needed some form of income, Craig suggested we try to sell a couple of WWOW-branded shows. Almost immediately we landed a show at a nightclub in Fort Lauderdale called City Limits. While it would be the first time they would try a wrestling show at their facility, the manager of the club felt he could draw a capacity crowd of 400, having been to the WWOW television taping we did at the War Memorial the year before. The advance we got for our September 10th card came just in time for me.

Within a few days of signing the deal and booking the talent, I got a call from Herb. I had not heard from him in a few weeks, and all of a sudden he was calling me again. When I asked him why he hadn't called or sent me the money he owed me, he made a lame excuse. I didn't buy into his lies, not this time.

It only took a few minutes to get to why he was calling. He had heard through the wrestling grapevine that Craig and I were going to do a WWOW show, and he wanted to do a UWF TV taping at the same building because he no longer wanted to pay the big rental at the War Memorial. I later found out from the building manager that he had lost the building because he had forged the insurance certificate for the previous show. When I told him the WWOW show was sold and that we had an exclusive on the building, which we did, he asked what he could do to shoot

TV there. I told him, "Just pay me what you owe me and I'll get you the building."

Three days after our phone call I received a check from Herb for every penny he owed me plus an extra $500 for the work he expected me to do for the next show he had planned. The only thing I promised to do was get him the building, and as soon as his check cleared, as agreed, I delivered City Limits so he could shoot TV there. He scheduled his show for October 1st, three weeks after ours.

Despite Craig's and my best efforts to get people to the building for the sold show, the Wild Women of Wrestling bombed horribly at City Limits, selling a paltry 58 tickets. Although Craig and I laid out an advertising plan for the manager of the building, he decided to promote the event as he would any other event he held there, and as a result we suffered terribly. After the show he gave us the balance of what he owed us, apologized for the poor attendance and said he grossly misjudged the situation. He asked if we would be interested in trying to do another show there with him, perhaps for less money, and offered to give us an advance on the spot. Instead of grabbing the money and running, we suggested that perhaps his facility was not suited for the female wrestling crowd. He appreciated our honesty, and we parted on good terms.

The next day I immediately called Herb to tell him about how poorly we drew and strongly suggested he cancel the event. But, being an egotistical little putz, he said all the poor showing did was prove that women's wrestling couldn't draw on its own. He told me that bringing in his roster would sell out the small 400-seat building. When I reminded him that the last show at the War Memorial drew only 300 and the one before that drew less than 250, he said that's because I had promoted for him and for this show he would do it himself. I wished him luck and told him I would be at the show to help if needed.

The UWF show at City Limits would prove to be the last event the group did in Florida. Advance ticket sales were so poor that Herb himself didn't even bother going to the show and sent Lenny to do his dirty work. Lenny had a sealed envelope, and when he opened it there were checks for Brian Blair, Paul Orndorff and a couple of others, but everybody else on the card got stiffed, including Luna Vachon, Tom Nash and Dave Heath. Lenny was cursed at and threatened by the workers who got nothing for putting their bodies on the line, but everybody knew it really wasn't his fault. They knew it was Herb who was not paying them.

If Herb had listened to me and canceled, he not only would have saved himself a lot of embarrassment, but he would have kept a decent reputation with the Florida workers. Instead, everyone lost that night — with the biggest loser being the UWF brand. It meant absolutely nothing in the South Florida market after that night. The total number of tickets that sold for the show? Nine! There were twice

as many people in the dressing room than in the audience.

Interestingly, nobody was really sure where Herb's money came from. Some say that back in the '80s he owned a prominent Los Angeles nightclub called the Aquarius 2000, and it was there he made his money and first met a lot of show business people who introduced him to the Hollywood drug scene. One person even told me that his club was featured in the movie *Thank God It's Friday* and that Herb had made a cameo appearance. However, according to research the movie was shot at a Los Angeles nightclub called Osko's.

Then there was the story that Bruno was told by Herb himself: he owned a chain of big and tall men's clothing stores. Whenever Herb was in a financial pinch, as Bruno recalled, he would tell him that he sold another one of his stores. According to Lenny, Herb did in fact own several retail stores in malls throughout California, but they did not cater to men. The stores were called It's a Big Girl and specialized in clothing for larger females.

Then there was the story I always heard floating around — that the money actually came from Herb's then wife Murry and her family in Hong Kong.

Even his corporation, N.G.K., Inc., was a bit of a scam. His three dogs, Nikki, Gucci and Kokie (a little white dog named after one of his favorite habits) were listed as the company's directors. When the owner of the Reseda Country Club tried to sue Herb for breach of contract, claiming N.G.K. did not deliver as promised, Herb's lawyer argued that Herb Abrams was simply a character on the UWF television show and was not a registered officer of the corporation. The judge threw the case out of court claiming the plaintiff had not served the proper person.

Regardless of what the real story was, like many who were in the business — me included — Herb became preoccupied with success and didn't know when to walk away. Maybe his obsession with success pushed him further and further from reality and into the world of recreational drug use; he clearly didn't know how to handle disappointment.

Although that October Fort Lauderdale show was the last event I ever did with Herb, we did do one more piece of business. About a month later, he called to say he needed a month's worth of original programming but didn't have any shows in the can to deliver to SportsChannel. He wanted to know if I would be willing to air the WWOW shows as four one-hour specials under the UWF banner. While he had no money to offer, he said he would give us all the commercial advertising time he was allotted. While I knew we would not make much, the broadcast would give us the brand exposure we needed if we were to raise new funds. With that in mind, I agreed to the deal, and the Wild Women of Wrestling finally made it on the air.

That was the very last direct business I ever did with Herb. Sometimes he would

call me up in the middle of the night just to say hello. Sometimes he would call to ask me if I was planning any shows. Sometimes he would call me just to tell me about his ongoing repugnant actions and behaviors.

And then there was the little game he liked to play.

"Howard," he would say when I answered the phone. "What have you done for the UWF today?"

Although he knew my answer was always, "Nothing Herb, what have you done for me today?" that simple question and answer game became a little ritual.

It took me many years to understand why Herb kept calling me: he felt guilty. He felt guilty that he had mistreated me and abused the friendship we'd initially forged. Even though I eventually moved on to different projects, I think, somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought that if he were ever to put the pieces of the UWF back together, I would go back to work for him.

Following an inevitably nasty divorce, Herb's last show took place on September 23, 1994, in Las Vegas, at the newly constructed 10,000-seat MGM Grand Arena. It was called the *Blackjack Brawl*. Televised live on SportsChannel, the show drew about 600 fans with a card that included not only UWF regulars, such as Brian Blair, Jim Brunzell, Steve Williams, Sonny Beach and Steve Ray, but other well-known wrestlers, like Dan Spivey, Johnny Ace, Tony Halme, Bob Orton Jr., Jimmy Snuka, Sid Vicious and Cactus Jack (Mick Foley). The show was highlighted by a drunken Herb Abrams getting on the MGM house microphone and shouting to the crowd, "Let's hear it for the Jews!" A comment that made Paul Heyman, Tod Gordon and I, who were watching the event together in a Tampa hotel room, cringe with embarrassment.

Herb trademarked the UWF name in June 1991 (Bill Watts never bothered to do so for his version of the UWF), and he founded his company with the hopes of returning professional wrestling to its roots, a goal that initially attracted Sammartino and others to the project. But Herb never delivered, letting those around him influence him too much.

The very last time I saw Herb Abrams was in October 1995, in Cannes, France. Hiro Matsuda and I were attending MIPCOM, a broadcasting trade show primarily aimed at European television programmers, and Herb showed up at our booth. He was peddling his UWF library, and while he invited the two of us to join him for dinner that evening, we never heard back from him.

More than six months went by before Herb got in touch with one of his middle-of-the-night phone calls. I don't recall what he said, but at 3 a.m. I promptly hung up on him and left the phone off the hook so he couldn't wake me again. In late July 1996, I received word from Lenny of Herb's death. Although I

was sad, Herb's premature end did not shock me. His self-destructive lifestyle gave every indication he was heading down that path.

Those who really knew Herb know he went out the same way he lived — in grand fashion. He had been arrested in a Manhattan office building after being found naked and covered in baby oil. Someone had called 9-1-1 to report a domestic disturbance, and when New York's finest arrived they found a screaming woman and Herb in the altogether, strung out on coke and destroying things with a baseball bat. While in police custody he died of a heart attack.

Believe it or not, there's at least one person who thinks his death was faked and that Herb is still alive today and in hiding.

"Until somebody shows me a body, I won't believe it," said Marty Yesberg. Marty worked for Herb toward the end of the UWF run as wrestling manager Colonel Red. "To this day I simply don't believe he's dead."

Toward the end Herb got involved with some pretty unsavory characters, some of who would have probably been considered prominent organized crime figures. The story goes: Herb borrowed money in an effort to keep his wrestling company afloat, and when it came time to pay the mobsters back he staged his own death because he didn't have the money.

Part of me would like to believe this — it feeds into the urban legend that has become Herb. Realistically, I know in my heart that Herb died of a cocaine-induced heart attack. Still, Yesberg has a somewhat convincing story to support his. A couple of years after Herb's reported death, a promoter was running a show in South Carolina under the UWF banner, although it didn't stand for Universal Wrestling Federation. The promoter of the show told Marty that someone fitting Herb's description — around five feet tall with a New York accent and wearing big cowboy boots — showed up asking questions about the name, and when he learned it stood for the United Wrestling Federation he left. Although Yesberg didn't see the guy, he is convinced it was Herb.

While it would be easy to write the story off in the same vein as the midnight Elvis encounters at the local 7-Eleven, who am I to argue with a member of the Cherokee County South Carolina Sheriff's Department?

I'll go along with the official report, however. While I try to think of Herb fondly, I remember his shortcomings. While some who did not know him will say he got what he deserved, and they are probably right, what makes it tragic in my eyes is that his death, like others who would meet the same fate before and after him, could have been avoided.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned about life from Herb is that obsession and denial leads to destruction. It's like trying to run a car on empty:

eventually you'll grind to a halt. And if you stay stalled in one place long enough, eventually another car is going to come along and barrel into you.

If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are gone, either write things worth reading, or do things worth writing.

— Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

NINE

RIDING THE ROLLER COASTER

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Posing with Hulk Hogan and Hiro Matsuda at MIPCOM

Human life is beset with ups and downs, joys and sorrows. These experiences are intended to serve as guideposts for man.

— Indian Spiritual leader Sri Sathya Sai Baba (1926–)

Even though our September 1991 WWOW show at City Limits in Fort Lauderdale was a complete bust, Craig and I still thought we could make women's wrestling work. We decided to try some more pre-sold shows, or at least shows with very little risk. As before, Craig agreed to put up the money.

I was taking a giant step backward, I felt, but after the UWF Fort Lauderdale

debacle I had no choice. My only source of income was the little I earned from a nighttime job selling event tickets for the local Police Benevolence Association (PBA) charity softball game. At five dollars for every pair of tickets I sold, it didn't amount to much.

At least, from a wrestling perspective, we had a decent plan.

When WWOW was first launched, Gordon Solie suggested Craig and I join the Florida Federation of Fairs and Livestock and set up a booth at their annual convention. It would give us the opportunity to solicit entertainment buyers from the various county fairs across the state, he explained. When Eddie Graham was alive and running Championship Wrestling from Florida, he would get the majority of his paid or guaranteed shows there. Now was the right time, so Craig and I dragged Luna to Jacksonville and set up a booth at the convention.

Although we didn't sign anyone on the spot, we got our name out there, and in time the exposure proved very profitable. Around the same time I sent out close to 200 letters to entertainment buyers all over the world in an attempt to sell an international tour. Rethinking the Soviet Union debacle of 1990, I believed someone, somewhere would be interested in doing women's wrestling.

In the meantime, we went back to looking for local show buyers and kept coming up empty — until out of the blue we received an inquiry letter at the old LMLW post office box from a high school in Palm Beach County asking if we would be interested in doing a fundraiser for the school's band.

After meeting with Port St. Lucie High School administrators, we cut a deal that gave us a written guarantee. Instead of taking a deposit, we based the show on ticket sales and agreed to be paid the entire amount of the guarantee on the night of the show. With 70-something high school band members selling tickets, all they had to do was sell four tickets each and not only would our expenses be covered, we would make a little too. And if they sold the 10 tickets each that they were asked to sell, the school would make a handsome profit. What could go wrong?

Now that we knew we had one profitable show lined up, we began thinking that we should add a second somewhere, since we could save money by giving the girls two dates instead of one. But since we didn't want to risk all of our Port St. Lucie profit and I still didn't have any money to put up, we brought in another partner, a guy named Brian Morrissey.

Brian was a Miami entertainment broker who worked with state and county fairs across the U.S., so he had a lot of connections; more importantly, he had a keen sense of entertainment trends in small, rural towns, especially in Florida. We were introduced to Brian by a guy Gordon Solie hooked me up with named C.M. Christ, an old-time carny who specialized in presenting fair sideshows. Brian and

C.M. had done quite a bit of work together and were partners in a number of small projects.

Brian suggested we do the show in a small migrant town in South Central Florida called Immokalee. It seemed you could only run Immokalee twice a year — in February and October, when the migrant workers were in full force. Plus you had to run the show on a payday. With no other entertainment for the migrants, it was essential the show run on a Friday. As luck would have it, we knew the coach of the school's wrestling team, Eddie Munn, who was also a part-time wrestler. We were able to get the building cheaply, provided a portion of the proceeds went to the school and that Eddie was booked on the show. So we added a special attraction to the card, a men's match.

With shows now scheduled for Friday and Sunday, I started hatching an idea to do a third show, on Saturday. The talent would cost less since I could offer the girls three bookings and any hotel costs would be absorbed by the other two shows. But the two questions were, where could I do it and how was I going to pay for it?

Inspired by my nighttime job of selling event tickets for the PBA, I got the brilliant idea of selling wrestling show tickets over the telephone. The only difference was that instead of selling tickets to individuals, I would sell advertisements in a printed program book to businesses and give the tickets away to them based on the size of the ad they purchased. In order for this to work, however, it had to be more than a one-man operation. I needed a team of people.

In the back of my brother Marty's travel agency's storefront there was a large office space he wasn't using, and it was already set up as a telemarketing room for a project he and my other brother Arnie were in on together. So I worked out a deal with Marty to make that back room into a wrestling sales office for a show on the Saturday in between the Immokalee and Port St. Lucie dates.

Working out a partnership deal with the War Memorial in which they would be paid a percentage based on the number of tickets sold, I placed an ad in the newspaper for salespeople under the same commission-only structure I accepted to sell tickets for the PBA. Actually, I was offering a handsome commission of 40 percent. I decorated the walls with wrestling posters and photos of the wrestlers who would appear on the card. In just a few days I had three sales people working with me — one working the phones in house with me and two on the streets, selling ads door-to-door. In all, we had six weeks to sell ads and give away 2,000 tickets to maximize the potential. With the total show cost being about $4,000, as a team we only needed to sell about 30 ads at $125 each. I also decided to sell individual tickets through Ticketmaster.

As the date got closer, some of the people I hired quit because they couldn't sell

and weren't making money; others I had to fire because they were lying to potential customers, saying it was for charity when it wasn't. We were selling a decent combination of ads and tickets; I landed a couple of big sponsors who put in a thousand dollars each. Because this was now my main focus, it was the only work I was doing. And because I needed money to live on, I started using the money that I was taking in from ad sales . . .

I'm sure you can see where this is going.

About two weeks before the show I realized that between what we were taking in and what I was taking out, I'd be $1,500 short. From a profit perspective, my cut of the other shows wouldn't make up the difference, so I decided to delay the show. I couldn't cancel because I had already taken in money and spent some of it, so I reached out to the War Memorial and worked out the same arrangement for a new date, Monday, April 20th. However, the delay was now going to up the price of the show from $4,000 to closer to $6,000 since I now had to shell out more for transportation, hotels and the payoffs for the girls — but I had bought myself almost an extra eight weeks to make up the difference.

With the Immokalee and Port St. Lucie shows upon us, Craig and I were nervous. Going into Immokalee, only 40 tickets had been sold in advance. Brian Morrissey kept assuring us everything would be fine because Immokalee was a walk up town. We were not worried about Port St. Lucie as the school had told us ticket sales were excellent. About two hours before the Immokalee show, one of the box office workers came to find Craig and me to see if we would offer a discount to someone who wanted to buy a ticket.

"What kind of a discount?" we asked.

"The person wants a ticket at half price."

"Why?"

"You need to come out here and talk to this person," he said.

When Craig and I went to the box office we thought someone was pulling a rib on us. There was an adult dwarf who wanted to know if he could buy a ticket at half price — and he was serious. We had to do everything we could to not laugh because it was like an old Vaudeville joke coming to life. We apologized to the dwarf and said we couldn't accommodate his request, but he could buy a ticket at full price, which he did.

As it turned out, the Immokalee show was a huge success. We drew nearly 800 paid fans to the all-girls show in a high school gym that sat 1,000. Craig and I did some creative advertising and booking to ensure a full house. We did all of our flyers for the show in both English and Spanish and promoted the event not only through the local Spanish radio station, but we went out to the migrant camps and

posted flyers on the bulletin boards there. Also, aside from prominently featuring former WWF women's champion Wendi Richter as our headliner on all of our advertising, we promoted the main event as the Queen of the Ring battle royal with the tagline "10 girls in the ring at once!" It was a gimmick, but with this crowd the gimmick worked.

There was another gimmick that worked too. Dave Heath, the former member of the Blackhearts who had abruptly replaced Tom Nash as Luna Vachon's significant other, asked if he could manage Luna on the show as he wanted to test out his new gimmick, Lestat, the Vampire Warrior. The name came from Anne Rice's 1976 novel *Interview with the Vampire*. Eventually Dave would discard the Lestat moniker and go strictly with the Vampire Warrior. When he debuted in the WWF with the gimmick six years later, he was rechristened Gangrel by Bruce Prichard and Vince Russo, a name derived from a vampire clan in the role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade*. In Immokalee, however, Lestat got huge heat from the crowd after power-bombing Luna's opponent, Malia Hosaka, and enabling Luna to steal the victory. Within minutes of Luna's tainted victory, the mostly Mexican crowd began throwing their shoes at the duo. (In some South American cultures, shoe tossing, using shoes as improvised projectiles or weapons, is a component of a number of folk sports. Because the shoe represents the lowest part of the body, it says that the person being attacked is "beneath them." It's a practice also prevalent in many Middle Eastern cultures. Think George Bush.)

With the success of Immokalee, it was on to Port St. Lucie, and we were pumped because school officials had told us that ticket sales were excellent. That was not the case, however. The school actually sold less than 200 tickets and had about half of that sitting in the gymnasium at bell time. The faculty adviser who oversaw the project completely dropped the ball, and, worse than that, officials had lied to us about ticket sales hoping they would get a huge walk-up. Part of our agreement was that we would be paid before the show, and when we were pulled into a side room by the school administrators we knew it wasn't going to be good. They gave us less than one-third of what they were supposed to and pleaded for us to do the show anyway. We reluctantly agreed since the ring was set up and all the talent was already dressed. If we canceled the show we would have to pay the girls anyway, so the show went on.

After the last match, when everyone would normally get their pay envelope, Craig and I called a meeting in the locker room to let everyone know what had happened with the school and to explain that we were cash short. Although we promised everyone that they would be paid what was agreed, we asked the girls to work with us to take a minimal amount and told them we would send the rest by

check or money order first thing in the morning. For the most part all the girls, including Wendi Richter, worked with us and we made good on the payoffs the next morning. The only ones who refused to work with us were Bambi and Peggy, who apparently had been screwed over several times by other promoters who had made similar promises. It seemed our history of taking care of the girls meant nothing and that was disappointing. It wouldn't be the only time I would be disappointed by the two of them.

With these shows out of the way, I spent all of my energy trying to make the Fort Lauderdale date a success. Even with the extra time I had given myself, I could see I was in trouble because, even though I was bringing in more money, I still needed a personal income and had to pay office expenses. By the end of March I realized I was going to be $3,500 short.

In my effort to find a sponsor who would put up a huge chunk of change, I reached out to several former business associates to see if they could deliver a sponsor. One of the people I talked to was Herb Rossin, who, early on, was someone I had spoken with about television syndication and advertising sales. Of everyone I spoke with, Herb was probably the most accurate explaining what it would take to launch a new program. Even though Herb owned ASAP Syndication at the time, he had begun working as a programming consultant for a newly launched satellite station, the Las Vegas Television Network. As it turned out, LVTN was looking to acquire original programming.

Over the next two weeks I was in direct negotiation with LVTN's president, Bill Butters, and I eventually struck a deal with him. They would license the four WWOW shows that had already been shot, plus they would bankroll a show that would be shot in Las Vegas. Butters wanted LVTN to have exclusive rights to the WWOW brand and the $2,500 per episode they were going to pay for the exclusive licensing for the shows already produced was more than enough to cover the Fort Lauderdale show's costs. Even though LMLW was still in the hole financially, by producing new episodes for the fledgling satellite network, within a year the original partners would recoup their original investment.

Not only had I avoided a potentially embarrassing situation, but I had singlehandedly rescued LMLW from the brink of extinction . . . or so I thought.

The Wednesday before the show, Butters was supposed to overnight half of the $10,000 to me, and upon receipt I was going to send him the WWOW tapes. By Thursday afternoon the deposit money had not arrived. Butters called to explain that there would be a delay, and they could not send the money out until Monday. Although I understood, I was starting to panic as I needed to take care of my expenses for the show. I not only had to cover payroll for the show, but the com-

mission money for the sales people and the War Memorial's cut of advertising sales.

In a bind, I asked my brother Marty to float me the $3,500 I needed to cover the expenses for the show until Butters's check arrived. Being financially tight himself at the time, having lost a large group of travelers to a competing agency, the only cash Marty had on hand was a deposit from another group he was booking. While he agreed to float me the money, he needed the cash back no later than Tuesday to make good with the hotel he was booking the group into. I showed him the letter from Butters stating that they were going to license the TV program, and he lent me $3,500 in cash.

With the stress temporarily off, we were all set for Monday night's show. I went into the office early to tie up any loose ends and then headed to the War Memorial. The show itself went pretty smoothly, as we had a small (about 400) but enthusiastic crowd. Both Marty and Arnie pulled me aside about three-quarters of the way through the show to tell me how much better they thought it was than the TV taping we had done there. They both advised me to think about doing these shows on my own without Craig's help in the future. I could never do that — Craig was my best friend and our bond went way beyond the realm of road trips and wrestling.

After taking care of the payoffs and settling with the building, I just wanted to get home and get into bed. I was beat from the roller-coaster pressure of having enough money to cover the show and pay my bills, and after giving up the ritual of going to Denny's with Craig, I began wondering if the time I had spent on the show was worth the aggravation. I would get my answer the next day.

The following morning I went into the office and waited for Federal Express to arrive with the check from Bill Butters. By 11:00, there was no delivery. I called the offices of LVTN and got an answering machine. It was still early in Las Vegas, so I called Herb Rossin. Herb told me that he hadn't worked with them for a few weeks — because they had no money. It seems shortly after he handed off my negotiation to Butters, the boom dropped. My heart went into my throat.

"They are supposed to send me $5,000," I told Herb. "They're licensing the show from me for 10,000 plus they want to do a new production."

"It'll never happen," Herb said. "And if you should get any money out of them, please let me know . . . because they owe me a couple of week's pay."

I panicked.

I was frantically calling Butters and left several messages. When he finally called back, he confirmed what Herb had told me. LVTN had no money to license anything. I was not going to receive a penny.

When I hung up, I wanted to throw up.

I had no money to give Marty.

I had no money to pay my bills.

I hadn't rescued LMLW, and my obsession with wrestling had now hurt my family.

How the hell could I have done this? How did I let things get to this point? What was I doing to myself and what on Earth was wrong with me?

Something in me snapped. I began cursing the wrestling business and myself for allowing it to consume and control me. I went ballistic. Not only did I tear all of the photos and posters from the office walls, I ripped the phone lines out of the wall by their cords and, in a final act of self-directed anger, toppled my desk over on its side.

Seeing the damage I'd done, I freaked out even more. My eyes filled with tears, and I dropped to my knees.

I was having a breakdown, and I couldn't stop it. I had put so much emotional and mental pressure on myself that I just buckled. I curled up into a ball and sat in a corner of the room, crying uncontrollably.

This all happened in a few minutes.

Although Marty was out of the office, my brother-in-law Jack, who was working for him at the time, rushed into the back to see what the commotion was. Finding me in the state I was in, Jack sat with me while my emotions came pouring out, and after about an hour he was finally able to get me up off the floor and into a chair. I knew he was worried.

As I tried to regain my composure, I told him what had happened. He knew Marty would be angry, but he assured me my brother would understand.

After what seemed like hours of staring into nothingness, I finally started to focus on the damage I had caused. I was so disconnected; it was as though someone else had done it all. Even though I was dazed, I slowly got up and began cleaning up the mess I'd made, throwing the torn posters and photos, broken picture frames and glass into a garbage can.

While trying to get my desk back into its proper position, I heard Marty come back into the office. How could I face him? I was so disappointed and ashamed for allowing myself to be put in this spot. Before he came into the back, Jack filled him in on everything.

As he walked into the back, I did everything in my powers to hold in my emotions. The last thing I needed to do was start blubbering in front of him.

He could see how distraught I was, and I could see he was bothered at how it was affecting me.

"I'm so sorry . . ." I began.

He cut me off, knowing how painful this was for me. "Look," he said calmly, "I'll get the money to cover the group, so I don't want you to worry about that. You'll just owe me the money, and we'll figure out a way for you to pay me back. For now, go home and try to get your head together."

And that was that.

Even though Marty knew my intention wasn't to pawn off my financial responsibilities on to him, he took the short-term hit for me. He knew, no matter how long it took, I would make good on the money I owed him, and by doing it the way he did, he allowed me to keep the little dignity I had left. Not every brother would do that for a sibling, but I can proudly say that, over the years, my three brothers at one time or another have gone to bat for me and each other.

The string of bad luck with the shows and the incident with Marty's money was enough to keep me away from wrestling for a while, but it wasn't the knockout punch it should have been. Shortly after the For Lauderdale show, I became withdrawn and sunk into a form of depression but would not admit it. I made every excuse I could to avoid looking for a job, and some days I would just stay in bed, not even bothering to come out of the bedroom except to use the bathroom and eat my meals. I didn't feel like talking or interacting with anyone. Both Sharon and my in-laws were concerned with my mental health, and after prodding by them, I decided to take their advice and seek professional help from a psychologist.

While I wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect, after a few sessions I started to be more like my old self, but I still wasn't motivated. When the psychologist determined that perhaps I needed some type of antidepressant medication to help me get out of my funk and cope with what I was going through, he sent me off to see a psychiatrist, which I did not quite welcome. In my mind only nutcases went to see a headshrinker, and I was neither. I was so immature and naive.

After a few sessions with the psychiatrist, he was convinced I just needed a little boost to help the neurotransmitters in my brain get back on the right track, so he prescribed Prozac. Was it clinical depression? Perhaps, but that's not what they diagnosed. I was told low serotonin levels were keeping me from being motivated.

Although I agreed to take the medication, I couldn't fathom why they didn't understand that maybe I was depressed because every time I tried to do something in a business I loved I got my teeth kicked in. I was depressed alright.

I think I was depressed because I couldn't figure out how to be successful in a business that seemed easy enough to navigate. I was emotionally tapped out, but like a glutton for punishment I kept at it, thinking I had more to give and I was strong enough to take it.

After a couple of weeks of taking the Prozac, I began to notice a change in my attitude, and I once again began reaching out to people. Not only was I looking for the job I desperately needed, but I was looking for a way to refinance LMLW. All of a sudden I was motivated again. It was as if someone had turned the light switch back on in my head after it had been left off for a long time.

One day as I rolled out of bed, instead of taking the antidepressant as I was supposed to, I took the vile of pills and emptied the entire contents into the toilet and flushed. That was the last time I ever took Prozac. It did the job that it was supposed to do, and I no longer needed that crutch to cope. I was back on track, trying to figure out how to be successful in the wrestling business, and I was determined the business would not get the best of me again.

One of the people I reached out to was Ron Ratner at Club Theatre Network. Ever since CTN had pulled their funding from us, I checked in from time to time to see how they were doing and if there was any chance of rekindling that business relationship. But I hadn't spoken to Ron in a few months, so I didn't know what was going on with them. Usually he answered that they were still in a holding pattern as far as expenditures were concerned. But this time around he told me that CTN was going through a corporate reorganization and that there might be an opportunity to revive our relationship. Since they had invested such a substantial amount in LMLW, they would want to protect their investment. Ron suggested a meeting so I could sit face-to-face with the people who were taking control of the company.

A furniture manufacturer named Far East Rattan, owned by a Hong Kong funding company named Prime Options Limited, had bought controlling interest in CTN. They had done so to control the publicly traded stock and to leverage CTN's production equipment to make corporate and product videos. The head of the company, Larry Glauber, brought with him a world of knowledge when it came to the furniture business but zilch when it came to television production.

About a week before my scheduled meeting with Glauber, Ron ended up in the hospital for a few days due to stress-related issues. It seemed the pressures of trying to keep CTN afloat were getting to him.

I didn't know everything that was going on, and it seemed that Glauber and his band of bamboo furniture yes-men had steamrolled over the CTN management team, leaving a trail of bruised egos and broken spirits. When Ron came back to the office, he was promptly removed as president and put in a role that transitioned all business decisions to Glauber. Ron was being pushed out systematically.

Just prior to the meeting in the CTN boardroom, Ron sat me down and filled me in. He told me Glauber was aware of CTN's investment role in LMLW and had

seemed upbeat and positive about the project. When Glauber came in, after all the niceties were out of the way, I began explaining the vision I had for moving everything forward and how CTN could recoup their investment.

Glauber cut me off.

He made it clear that CTN wouldn't invest another penny in the project. Instead he brought in some paper he wanted me to sign that would give CTN full rights to the tapes in exchange for what was owed to them.

"That's not what our agreement was," I pointed out to him. "CTN made an investment, and I will not sign over anything."

Glauber didn't care what agreement was in place.

"No offense, but Ron didn't have any authority to enter into the agreement with you. It's deals like that which put CTN on the verge of bankruptcy. I'm here to stop the bleeding and start allowing this company to make money."

Not only did Glauber throw Ron under the bus, he put the bus in reverse and ran over him again. He wanted to make it perfectly clear that Ron had no power whatsoever anymore. Because Ron had just gotten out of the hospital, he was in no position to fight back. . . . And considering I was still on the mental mend myself, neither was I, but I wasn't going to just roll over.

"Well, I don't have the authority to sign off on something like that without approval from my partners," I told him. "I'll have to get back to you."

Glauber told me the best he could counter was a deal in which CTN would attempt to license the footage, and if they recouped their investment, then we could split any overage 50/50. It was a tempting offer and better than nothing, but I stuck to my story and told him I would get back to him. Glauber thanked me for coming in, shook my hand and exited the room.

Ron and I just sat there staring at each other.

"What the hell was that about?" I asked, more stunned than anything.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said dumbfounded, as the way the meeting had played out caught him off guard too. "This guy is out of control."

He was.

Glauber was so paranoid about Ron and I being in cahoots that the day after our meeting he instructed some of the CTN staff to move all of the master tapes they had of WWOW into a locked cabinet that only he had the key to. He told Ron he didn't want the tapes "disappearing."

I don't think Glauber had bad intentions toward me per se, he was just a bit of a flake — and considering the people who I had already dealt with up to that point, that was saying a mouthful.

Eventually Glauber's eccentricity — like greeting bankers barefooted when they

came to the building — led to CTN's board ousting him and reinstalling Ron. But at that point the company was running on fumes.

As for the WWOW tapes, once Glauber was out of the building, Ron unlocked the cabinets they were in and turned them over to me, ensuring they would not be held hostage.

Over the next few months a parade of individuals came in and out of that building. Production companies subleased space, other production companies tried to buy the building out from under CTN and even Ron himself tried to find new financing in an attempt to take control of CTN and get rid of Glauber. The company had undergone such drastic changes that, aside from the studios and the equipment, they no longer looked like a television production company; everyone from Media Productions, the original company, was gone, including Jim Haney.

At one point a group led by a Curacao businessman and land developer named Pete Plantain took interest in one of the companies. Plantain installed someone named Simi "Sam" Dijon to oversee his interests, and together they hired a production guru named Wayne Wiggins, who was a former director of CBS NFL games. He was to develop original programming for a retooled CTN for sale or barter to networks and individual stations. As a former sports guy, Wayne saw some potential in WWOW and gave me an opportunity to resuscitate LMLW. On paper he hired me as a commissioned salesperson, to see if I could bring in customers who needed production work done. While I did attempt to generate new business, I didn't have many contacts. In reality Wayne hired me with the understanding that if Plantain took controlling interest in CTN as planned, WWOW would go back into production as one of their original programs.

I felt I was in a pretty good spot, knowing that if either Ron or Plantain took controlling interest in the company my wrestling career would continue.

But then something unexpected happened.

Wayne realized that Dijon didn't know a thing about running a television production company, so he began dealing directly with Plantain. After a series of discussions with CTN's chief financial officer, Rick Sawick, who had been there throughout the entire ordeal, there was a plan in place for Plantain to move forward without Dijon.

A special board meeting was scheduled. Plantain was coming in from Willemstad, Curacao, to present his plan and offer to the board of directors.

When Dijon found out, however, he reached out to an unlikely ally — Larry Glauber. He knew Glauber would not take kindly to someone else trying to come in to take control of the company. It was like waking a sleeping giant — up to that point Glauber was so focused on his bamboo furniture business that he wasn't

paying attention to what was going on with CTN.

On the day of the big showdown, with all the CTN bigwigs there, Plantain made his presentation; Glauber was there too and presented a counterplan. I waited with Wayne in the production-planning office. Going into that meeting, we were all pretty confident that Plantain would prevail.

But politics make strange bedfellows. After the four-hour marathon meeting concluded, Glauber shockingly emerged from the boardroom victorious. What he did and said I have no idea, but Pete Plantain left the building visibly upset — rightfully so, considering he'd floated CTN for a few months and was now completely out of the picture. Although he wasn't gloating, Glauber came into the production room and told Wayne and me he was back in charge, which signaled to me I would be out on my ear the next morning. Instead, Glauber assured us that it was business as usual and whatever deals we had in place would be honored.

I didn't know what to make of it, but I had the weekend to ponder my options. With nothing else on the horizon, I had no choice but to keep working at CTN and hope for the best.

Once again Ron was pushed to the side, but Wayne still had carte blanche over production. While I hoped there was a chance to still shoot wrestling, I quickly realized that was no longer going to be considered. Instead I was tasked with coming up with ideas for low-budget television shows.

Glauber tried to win my loyalty, but I felt he was being condescending. I recall him asking me if I wanted to drive his Mercedes Benz, as if that was going to impress me. Even though I was driving around in a 15-year-old Chevy shit-box, I'd driven my share of luxury cars. Still, I bit my lip and did what was asked, sticking around to collect a paycheck. For the most part Glauber stayed away and let Wayne and Rick handle things, coming in only when necessary.

In August '92 everything changed again. Hurricane Andrew ripped through South Florida and wiped out a large chunk of South Miami. Craig's condominium escaped severe damage, but his parents' house was battered. The day after the storm I drove into the area to bring Craig and his family supplies, despite the National Guard's warning to avoid the neighborhoods that were hardest hit. It was like riding into a war zone.

From that point forward, Larry Glauber began coming around CTN regularly. One day he called me into the boardroom, and an inventor who had created a window curtain that could be put up in a matter of minutes was with him. He wanted me to come up with an idea for an infomercial. While I tried my best, that wasn't my thing and I started getting frustrated. Still, I told him to let me think about it.

The next day he called the entire staff into the boardroom and said that, instead of creating or looking for low-budget television shows to produce, he wanted everyone to look for products we could shoot infomercials for. When I questioned him on the change in emphasis, he explained that he thought the company could generate more money by working with product manufacturers and buying infomercial television time than by producing shows and selling or syndicating them. He was probably right, but I knew this wasn't for me. In a truly stupid move, I tried to derail the guy.

I went home and wrote a scathing letter to the CTN board of directors, explaining why they needed to remove Glauber from power and either put Ron back in charge or reach out to Pete Plantain. I wrote that Glauber knew nothing about the production, television or advertising industries, and that his vision for CTN was doomed. With Glauber at the helm, I reasoned, CTN would suffer the same fate as the Titanic. I did not want to go down with the ship, so I tendered my resignation. I stated that if they decided to change leadership, I would welcome the opportunity to go back to work for them.

That little stunt caused me to be unemployed for several weeks. But I wasn't unemployed for long — I soon found myself back doing telephone collection work.

As it turned out, I was right about CTN's future. At some point they changed their name to Hemdale Communications, and I ran into Glauber a year and a half later in Las Vegas at the NATPE (National Association of Television Program Executives) convention, when I was working with Hiro Matsuda. I didn't know CTN had changed their name and was told by a mutual friend that Hemdale specialized in retail video distribution and might be interested in representing World Superstars of Wrestling, Hiro's company. When we got to the Hemdale booth, I was shocked to see Glauber, and he was less than thrilled to see me. He told Matsuda and Gordon Solie, who happened to be with us, that I had stabbed him in the back and they should watch themselves. Luckily both Hiro and Gordon were aware of the relationship between LMLW and CTN.

By the end of '92 I was growing tired of telephone collection work and needed something a bit more challenging. While Craig got the itch to do a couple of wrestling shows — and of course I was always game for that and went along with the plan — I got a call out of the blue from Shelly Schermer, and he asked me if we had ever done anything with the WWOW tapes. At that point the only deal was the barter I had done with Herb, but that didn't amount to much. Shelly was starting a new television syndication company under the Media Film Group (MFG) name, and while he had a library of movies that would be the main asset of the company, he was looking for alternate forms of programming. He asked me what

I was doing personally, and when I told him that I was doing collection work at a magazine company, he asked me if I would be interested in going to work for him, syndicating movies to television stations. It wasn't a difficult decision to make.

Shortly after the first of the year, I began a new career in television syndication. Shelly, who had been doing it for years and was fairly successful, showed me the ropes. A company could work out all sorts of syndication deals with a television station. There were cash deals in which stations would buy the programming. This was usually reserved for talk shows, game shows and series that had been on the air previously and were in reruns. There were also traditional barter deals, which were reserved for shows that got decent ratings but were hard to sell advertising for, such as wrestling. The station would take a program and give the syndication company back half the time in the show, which they could then sell or place their own products in. And then there was what MFG did. We gave the stations a movie package in exchange for a block of time, but instead of the time being during the movie itself, we would get the time "banked" so we could use it at a later date. That made the time more valuable because we could sell blocks of advertising on a variety of stations at different times of day.

Honing my new craft as a television syndicator, I developed skills that would eventually land me exactly where I wanted to be in the wrestling industry. Craig, meanwhile, set up two wrestling shows. Aside from going back to Immokalee, Craig booked a show in another small town near Lake Okeechobee called Clewiston. We would run the shows back-to-back on Friday and Saturday night, and I would help him as best as I could to promote the small towns. We again used the formula that had been so successful the year before in Immokalee, but this time we also applied it to Clewiston. However, Clewiston did not have the same demographic as Immokalee. While Immokalee was comprised primarily of migrant workers, Clewiston was mostly low-income African-American families. Our challenge was to book a crew that would work well with both audiences.

For the Friday night show in Clewiston, we not only did an eight-girl battle royal, but we pushed a fairly green African-American girl Malenko had trained as our star. I don't recall her real name or if she went anywhere afterward, but we called her "Hott" Chocolate. Also, since we only had eight girls booked, we added a men's match to the card featuring former Global champ Steve "The Party Animal" Collins pitted against longtime Florida veteran Mark Benedict, who was best known as Gator B. Long but worked this show in his imposing monster gimmick, Lord Humungous.

For Saturday night's show, we had Lord Humungous back to work against the high school's wrestling coach, Eddie Munn, which would again enable us to get the

building at a low cost and keep the students at the school happy. Craig and I also came up with two ideas to market the show to the predominantly Mexican fan base. First we gave a *luchadore* spin to the show by having both Peggy Lee Leather and Kim Ollis (Penelope Paradise) work under hoods. Peggy worked under her LPWA masked gimmick Lady X, which could be seen as just about anything, while we gave Kim a moniker that couldn't be interpreted as anything but *lucha* — Señorita Con La Mascara. Basically, we were treading on Mil Mascaras's name for the night. Then we created a unique match for the main event: an eight-girl Mexican strap match. We paired off four sets of two girls and had them bound together with a rope, like the setup for a Texas bull-rope match. Each group of two worked independently from the other pairs in the ring and as one eliminated her opponent by pinning her, the winner would untie her Mexican strap and continue with the match against the other winners. It was a little bit convoluted, but it looked good to the crowd, and they were into it. They especially liked the fact that Señorita Con La Mascara, who couldn't speak a word of Spanish, was declared the winner.

Those two shows were enough to keep my wrestling hunger satisfied as I continued syndicating movies. I started building up a network of personal contacts in the television industry and began seeing names associated with television programming and advertising that I had come across previously, when first venturing into television marketing for our WWOW shows.

On the home front, Sharon and I were still living with her parents, and although we talked about moving out, there was always something rearing its ugly head that prevented us from moving back into a place of our own. I was slowly digging myself out of debt, but we were still a long way from seeing financial independence.

In April Brian Morrissey called and asked me if I was interested in doing a couple of guaranteed shows in New Jersey. He knew a guy named Warren Lewis who owned a company called Super Promotions, Inc., that did telemarketing fundraisers for various police athletic leagues by presenting live events. Warren had had a falling out with the wrestling promoter he normally worked with and needed somebody to put on a double shot (two shows on the same day) during the summer. When Warren agreed to the price Craig and I came up with, as well as our terms — we would get all of our money in advance since we had been stung a few times — we drew up the contracts to do a pair of WWOW shows on August 28th at Garden State Park in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, for the Camden Police Athletic League (PAL). The other promoter was Dennis Coralluzzo. As it turned out, Dennis and I would get to know each other very well and begin working together the following year.

With the Cherry Hill show four months away, my time was occupied with syndicating Shelly's movie package, and being good at it I was content to make that my new profession. Shelly and his partners were trying to take their company public, and so the bigger the time bank I could build, the better positioned they would be. At first the notion of MFG going public through a penny stock offer made me nervous and skeptical, having witnessed CTN fall apart at the seams. But I kept my mouth shut and my head low and kept plugging along.

In June, right after I finished booking the talent for the Cherry Hill shows, I got two phone calls that would turn my life upside down over the next few months.

The first call was from a woman name Orly Beigel. Although she lived in Miami, Orly was a concert promoter in Mexico and Israel and was responding to one of the letters I had sent to entertainment buyers the previous year. She and another impresario in Tel Aviv named Moshe Jossef, who owned a concert promotion company called Yael Productions, wanted to bring a tour of professional wrestling to Israel in December during Hanukkah. It seemed the WWF had done some shows there recently and had done very well, plus Fritz Von Erich's World Class Wrestling had done successful shows in Israel several years earlier.

The second call I got was from Hiro Matsuda. Hiro and I spoke periodically, and he always told me to learn as much as I could about television because one day he would call on me to work with him. This was "the call." Hiro and another partner were starting a new wrestling company, and, remembering my passion for the business, he wanted to bring me on board to syndicate their show.

It's not as though everything happened overnight — both the Israeli deal and my arrangement with Hiro took several weeks to iron out. But by the time August rolled around and Craig and I were set for the show in Cherry Hill, the December tour for Israel and the marketing plan for World Superstars of Wrestling were in place. Just as I was thinking that I was done with wrestling, all of a sudden I was sucked back in again.

Feast or famine . . . when it rains it pours . . . call it what you will, but that's how quickly my luck was changing. And while things weren't unfolding as smoothly as they could have, or should have, I loved every minute of it.

The trip to New Jersey was interesting. Wendi Richter, Candi Devine and Sir Oliver Humperdink all used frequent flyer miles to get to Philadelphia for the show, while the rest of us traveled by car. Rustee Thomas drove up from Virginia. Misty Blue and her girls — Kat LaRoux and Angie Maurin — drove down from New York. Craig and I rented a van, and with Kim and Barry Houston, who wanted to come along for the ride, drove up from South Florida. We picked up Bambi and Peggy in Georgia.

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

With Diane "Misty Blue" Simmes and "Nasty" Angie Maurin backstage at the Garden State Race Track

While I always enjoyed a good road trip, this was going to be different: we were going to spend almost 48 hours in a vehicle with three lady wrestlers. After eight hours of banter, the road stories started wearing thin — and so did the stupid "name game."

It's just like "Geography," where you name a location and the next person has to come up with a place that begins with whatever letter your place ends with. In the wrestling version, you use the first letter of whatever the last name of the wrestler is. If someone says Dusty Rhodes, you can respond with Randy Savage. It goes on and on like this until someone quits, can no longer come up with new wrestler names, or becomes so annoyed that they strangle their opponent.

While playing with Barry Houston, I got so tired of waiting for him to come up with a name, I fell asleep. It didn't last long, however; and I was woken by Barry yelling "Rock Riddle!"

"Shut the fuck up!" I snapped.

First, I had never heard of Rock Riddle before that moment, and naturally I

questioned his existence (I did finally meet him fifteen years later at an NWA legends convention in Charlotte, North Carolina.) And second, you don't wake someone out of a dead sleep on a road trip unless they're the one sitting behind the wheel. I was cranky to begin with — now I was miserable.

Aside from hitting a pigeon while it was my turn to drive — Peggy promptly plucked its severed head out of the van's grill for me — the ride was uneventful, except that we learned Bambi had a bout of anorexia when she was younger. While that was pretty serious stuff, we couldn't help but laugh when Peggy was trying to describe how thin Bambi was while afflicted with the eating disorder.

"Her goozle was only yay big," she said, as she used both her hands to make a small circle.

"Her goozle?" I asked, never having heard the word before. "What the hell is a goozle?"

Peggy was trying to describe the size of Bambi's neck (I hadn't realized I needed to pack my English-Redneck dictionary).

We did the double shot, and despite the low attendance — maybe 20 people — we really had fun. We rented our ring from Ted Petty, who also served as our referee and was best known for his "Flyboy" Rocco Rock gimmick in Public Enemy. It was the first time we ever had to deal with a state athletic commission since we never had to do so in Florida.

While we worked on a guarantee and were happy with our deal, Warren and the Camden PAL had made a small fortune. Lewis's company had sold more than $50,000 in advertising, and the program they printed looked like a small phone book, as it had more than one hundred pages of advertisements.

Although everyone had agreed to work both shows for a specific payoff, Bambi and Peggy held us up for more money when they saw the size of the ad book. Even though I explained that we didn't get any of that money and were working on a guarantee, they blatantly refused to work the evening show unless Craig and I doubled their pay. This was the third time that the two of them had caused me aggravation. I eventually caved in and paid them, but not the amount they demanded. I told Craig that night that I felt like leaving them in New Jersey and pulling them off the Israeli tour. Craig said he would have no problem with that, but cooler heads prevailed, and we took them back to Georgia. Before the end of the trip we told them we'd have to think twice about booking them in the future.

With Cherry Hill behind us, I began focusing on Israel and putting a budget together. Based on the level of talent the promoters wanted and the number of shows they wanted to run — six in ten days (three in Tel Aviv, one in Jerusalem and one in Haifa) — the talent was going to run $70,000. Since I made Craig my

partner on the deal and had planned for us to clear $30,000 each, and considering the fact that I had to pay Orly $22,950 as a fee for putting the deal together, the contract called for a $152,950 guarantee. Sixty thousand dollars would be paid on signing, and the balance would be paid upon our arrival in Tel Aviv; Orly would get her cut once I received final payment.

In the meantime, Hiro followed up and asked me to meet to discuss his new project. We had lunch at a Jewish delicatessen in Hollywood, Florida, called Deli-Den. Hiro enjoyed a good corned beef sandwich, so it became something of a ritual. Once we were face-to-face, he finally revealed who his partner was — Hulk Hogan. Matsuda wanted to know if I could really deliver and generate revenue from international tape sales.

While I was confident in my ability, I needed to speak with someone who knew the foreign market inside out. I reconnected with Bob Syers of RJS Marketing — his new company was now called CATS (Children's Animation Television & Syndication) — since he had sold wrestling to many foreign markets and knew the full potential. Bob suggested we go to MIPCOM in Cannes, France, in October to sell the show. Bob even provided me with a list of current market sales rates and drew up some provisional sales projections based on past figures.

Hiro's original concept was that he and Hogan would create a U.S.-based product that would have the look and feel of New Japan. Their plan was to do a television taping and use the footage to make a demo reel and pilot episode. But with MIPCOM only six weeks away, that wasn't possible.

Since the idea was to emulate the look and feel of NJPW, I suggested Hiro cut a deal with them to use their footage, concentrating on their American talent. This would enable him and Hogan to create a demo reel and at least six one-hour episodes. Hiro got back to me a few days later, and we began setting everything in motion for a trip to France to launch a new wrestling brand.

I was really excited because, with Hogan's name and face on everything, the biggest challenge wasn't going to be how many international networks we could sign up, but who we were going to turn down. Hulk was the biggest name in the business, and it was his star power that had enabled the WWF to expand into the global television powerhouse they had become. Because Hogan had left the WWF several months earlier and had already been to Japan to wrestle, we had fresh footage of him to use for the demo.

As the World Superstars of Wrestling project was coming together, I was also going back and forth with Moshe Jossef, the Israeli promoter, about who we were bringing to Israel. One of the people Moshe had initially agreed to — and who I had already spoken to and booked, Abdullah the Butcher — was no longer wanted.

Moshe felt Abby was too old, and while I argued that he'd go over huge with the Israeli crowd and that they'd remember him from his World Class days, it became clear that the Israeli wanted prominent fixtures of WWF television. So I began putting a crew together of ex-WWF stars to take to the Holy Land. Besides the female wrestlers, only Kevin and Nancy Sullivan and Wylie Sacks (a.k.a. Steve Collins), who was going to wrestle under the Lucifer gimmick he used in Japan while wrestling for Victor Quinones's W*ING promotion, were not ex-WWFers.

At my regular job, I let Shelly know about my upcoming trips abroad, and he had no problem. He even wanted me to package some of the films in our library to foreign stations. I was unaware, however, that there were shenanigans going on regarding the stock. Shelly was being undermined by one of the partners he had brought in, and the two of them were jockeying for power as they were getting ready to issue the penny stock. Both Shelly and Charles Scheuerman came to me individually to see if I would work with them in the event they took complete control of the company. Talk about déjà vu; it was CTN all over again. I said yes to both, but I trusted Shelly more than Charles. As long as I got a steady paycheck, however, I didn't care who I was working for. Within a few months, I felt I'd be working for Hiro and Hogan full-time anyway.

At home things were getting better, and Sharon and I began talking about moving back into a place of our own. My cut of the Israeli deal would eliminate nearly all of our debt, and with a few more months of steady paychecks from Shelly, we could be in our own home by February or March.

But as I had experienced countless times already, not everything went according to plan.

About three weeks before MIPCOM and just as all of our advertising at the trade show was being put to bed, Hiro called to let me know that Hogan was pulling out of the deal. According to Hiro, Hogan claimed that McMahon still owed him a substantial amount of ancillary revenues and would hold up his money if he associated with any other wrestling company. I thought it was a bogus excuse and couldn't understand why Hogan was getting cold feet, but apparently he had made up his mind and was not going to change it. He was officially out of the picture.

When Hiro asked what I thought, I stated the obvious: since he had already paid for our booth, advertising, airfares, hotel and the demo reels and first six episodes, it would be stupid to pull the plug. I told Hiro that we could still go to MIPCOM if we switched some things around and took the emphasis off Hogan, and if we sold any contracts we could move forward. If we didn't, he could cut his losses, which would come to around $50,000.

So, on my recommendation, we were able to stop the presses and have Hogan's

likeness removed from all of our advertising and marketing paraphernalia, and we replaced him with photos of Keiji Mutoh (a.k.a. the Great Muta).

As my travel dates to France got closer, plans were also made for me to do a press tour in Israel with one of the male and one of the female wrestlers. Since most of the crew I had booked were busy on tours of Japan, I worked out a deal to bring Kevin Wacholz (a.k.a. Nailz) and Kim Ollis with me to Tel Aviv. I would get home from France and leave for Israel just a few days later.

On my last day in the office before my trip to France, I had to run some last minute errands, so I told Shelly I would be back in about an hour. After leaving the office and getting into my car, I realized I had left some paperwork in my desk that I needed, so I went back into the office. When I opened the door unannounced, there was Shelly with my personal address and phone book, which I had left on my desk, in his hand, making a copy of it on the copier machine. I couldn't believe it. I grabbed the book and all of the copies from him and told him that all he had to do was ask. He didn't say a word, and there was no need for me to say anything either. I wasn't sure if he was copying my book because he was going to let me go and wanted my contacts or if he thought I was going to quit and take my contacts with me. Despite the lack of trust on Shelly's part, I had no plans to quit, and I simply took the book and copies with me when I left the office.

While I was in France doing my job for Hiro, the WWF started to make problems for my Israeli promoter. They began advertising a future tour and were promoting it with Hogan's name. I knew that Hogan was no longer with the WWF and any promotion of his name was being done without his permission. Through Hiro I contacted Jimmy Hart, who was serving as Hulk's business manager, and I faxed him the advertising the WWF was doing. Within 24 hours of having sent my fax, Hogan's attorney contacted the WWF to cease using his name and photo in association with their Israeli tour. I would actually see Hogan and Hart in Cannes before the end of the week, as Hulk was there to help promote his new television series, *Thunder in Paradise*.

When he and Jimmy came by the booth, for the first time I got a sense of why he might have pulled out on the deal with Hiro. As he looked at our booth and saw the photo of Muta representing our brand, he asked Hiro, "Are you sure Inoki isn't involved?" When Hiro assured him Inoki had no part of the company, I got the sense that Hogan really didn't believe him and didn't want to be partners in a venture that was associated with Japanese legend and NJPW Chairman Antonio Inoki. Although I would understand that hesitation about a year later, at the time it didn't make sense.

Hiro and I really started bonding in France. We stayed at this little hole-in-the-

wall place called the Ruc Hôtel. It was about 10 blocks from the Palais des Festivals, which is where the convention was being held and is most noted for holding the annual Cannes Film Festival. Each morning Hiro and I would meet for breakfast before walking to the Palais.

On the first night of our stay, Hiro even pulled a little rib on me, although I didn't realize it at the time. Hiro loved to drink and could pack away the beers with the best of them. I'm not a beer drinker, but I'll have a little wine with my dinner every once in a while. On this particular night, Hiro wanted me to drink beers with him, and when I politely refused, he said he would be insulted if I didn't join him. Not wanting to insult him, I agreed to join him for a drink. Since I had ordered a chicken dish for dinner, I ordered a nice white wine. But instead of giving me a glass, they gave me a large carafe. Every time I would take a little sip, Hiro would top off my glass, and he insisted I was insulting him if I didn't drink along with him. After dinner and back at the hotel, the wine wasn't sitting very well with me. I spent the majority of the night close to the washroom. The next morning I told Hiro what had happened and how sick I had been, and he thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard. I saw a little bit of his masochistic side, but I knew it was just a rib. When we went out for dinner that night he tried to pull the rib on me again, but I told him that if I was insulting him by not drinking alcohol he could consider himself being insulted from that point forward because I was only going to drink Coca-Cola. Hiro laughed and never asked me to drink with him again, except to remind me of the rib he had pulled on me.

At the convention itself, World Superstars of Wrestling shared a booth with Bob Syers, and while we got a lot of traffic from our ad in the MIPCOM guidebook, most of our leads came from people Bob sent our way. He had a lot of prospective buyers come into the booth for the programs he was peddling, and when he was done with them he handed them off to me. By the time our first convention ended, we had one signed contract for a limited run on a Saudi Arabian station and commitments from a half-dozen networks in such diverse places as the Middle East, the United Kingdom, Indonesia and South America. Based on the commission structure I had worked out with Hiro, I was poised to earn about $40,000 over the next four months and was ecstatic. Even though what I was doing for Hiro was like the blind leading the blind, as I was still feeling my way around the international syndication environment, I had a good handle on things and was confident that I was going to deliver something big for us.

When I got home from France, waiting for me was a letter from Linda McMahon threatening me with a lawsuit for trademark infringement. The letter claimed I was attempting to deceive the public in Israel by promoting my upcoming shows under

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The Israeli ad that put the WWF on the warpath

the name World Wrestling Superstars (WWS), in an attempt to confuse the public with the WWF. The letter also said I didn't have the right to promote any of the wrestlers who would be on the tour under the names they were being promoted. However, the only names the WWF had legitimate claims to were Mike Jones, who was being billed as Virgil even though the promoter knew not to promote him under that name, and Tom Boric (a.k.a. Paul Diamond), who was originally billed as Max Moon, a character the WWF hadn't used in several years. Ted DiBiase was being billed as The Millionaire, John Nord was being billed as The Berserker, Kevin Wacholz was being billed as the Prisoner and others, like Road Warrior Hawk, "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan, Jake "The Snake" Roberts, Tito Santana, "Rockin'" Robin Smith and Greg "The Hammer" Valentine, all had full rights to their stage names. The only other person of question was Steve Keirn, who was going to wrestle on the tour as the Evil Clown. While Steve had worked in the WWF as one of the two Doinks along with Matt Bourne, when he started doing the gimmick on the independent circuit, he changed his makeup enough for the WWF office to leave him alone. However, regarding the tour, they claimed the Evil Clown was directly infringing on their Doink trademark. The letter also claimed I was using the name in Germany.

Although I had advised Moshe to promote the tour under the name Global Championship Wrestling, he decided to go with WWS and was trying to do just what the World Wrestling Federation was claiming. It also seemed that at the time there were promoters in Germany doing exactly the same thing, and the WWF office thought I was involved with that too. The WWF was not willing to share Israel, which had become a highly profitable market for them.

The WWF had enclosed a release with the letter that they wanted me to sign. The release said I admitted to infringing on their rights and would not promote the

events under the WWS name. When I called my lawyer to ask about the lawsuit, he told me it was a veiled attempt to get me to pull the shows because Titan Sports, which owned the World Wrestling Federation, didn't have any international trademark rights to the WWF name, as that was owned by the World Wide Fund for Nature (which in North America still goes by its original name, the World Wildlife Fund). He told me that in an international court of law the names "World Wrestling Federation" and "World Wrestling Superstars" would not be confused, just as "World Boxing Federation" and "World Boxing Association" wouldn't be confused, despite having similar words and pertaining to the same industry. Upon my lawyer's advice, I responded to the threat with a simple letter stating I did not agree with their position and did not know who was promoting in Germany under the WWS banner, assuring them it was not me. I referred them back to the promoter in Israel if they had any questions. I believe it is situations like this one that led the World Wide Fund for Nature to sue the then World Wrestling Federation for unfair trade practices in 2000. Although both parties had shared the initials "WWF" since the fall of 1979, the conservation organization claimed that the wrestling company violated a 1994 agreement regarding international use of the WWF initials. The ensuing lawsuit is partly what prompted the name change for the wrestling company to World Wrestling Entertainment.

Unfortunately that did not stop the WWF attack dogs.

They took a double-pronged approach in an attempt to shut down the shows in Israel. They reached out to all of the talent directly, offering them jobs if they did not go on the tour. Unlike today, where there are hundreds of independent promoters, in 1993 there were only a handful of us, so anything of significance we were doing got the attention of the WWF office. With the exception of Mike Jones, everyone who was booked on the tour turned down the WWF offer as they had already signed a contract with me and had been given an advance. Jones promptly returned his deposit money along with a letter withdrawing from the tour. While some might be surprised that so many turned down an opportunity to go back to work for the WWF, I wasn't, as most of the talent was looking at the trip as a chance to be in the Holy Land during the holidays. Many of the workers were planning to bring their wives or girlfriends, thinking of it more as an experience of a lifetime than a wrestling tour. Kevin and Nancy Sullivan, for example, who were not even originally booked to go, called me virtually every day for two weeks when they heard about the tour to badger me about going.

"Howard," Kevin would say in that deep Boston accent, "How could you even think about going to Israel without me?"

The second method the WWF took to stop the tour was scare tactics against

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Relaxing in Tel Aviv after a full day of publicity with Penelope Paradise and Nailz

Moshe, which came to a head while I was on the press tour.

Kim Ollis and I flew from Miami and met Kevin Wacholz in New York for the long trip to Tel Aviv. We didn't talk much with Kevin on the first of the two overseas flights, but we got a chance to bond with him a little once we got to Paris, as we had a five-hour layover. On the flight from Paris to Tel Aviv we went over our itinerary, and once we landed in Israel, it was wall-to-wall business for the next five days.

Moshe kept Kim and Kevin busy every day with the press, whether it was visiting sick children in the hospital, doing wrestling demonstrations out by the hotel swimming pool in front of photographers or driving an hour to Jerusalem to be on the Israeli equivalent of *Good Morning America* — every day there was something in the newspapers or on television that was very positive about the tour, which was now only about 30 days away.

Despite Moshe's hard work generating positive press, the WWF's Israeli promoters (the Germany-based Mama Concerts), were fighting dirty behind the scenes. Even though Moshe had a lot of stroke in the Israeli market, Mama was a major player in the concert industry and started applying pressure with some of the other acts Moshe had booked. They also began a negative campaign against our tour, issuing statements every day that just weren't true: we were not bringing the

stars we were promising, our wrestlers were old and unable to perform, the promoter was selling tickets just to keep the money with no intention of presenting the shows. In addition, the WWF's lawyers in Israel were constantly threatening Moshe with legal action.

On the morning of the full-blown press conference, which aired that night on Israeli national television, the WWF's lawyers showed up and attempted to shut us down. They even had cease and desist papers drawn up and ready to deliver to Hulk Hogan, as they were under the impression we were going to announce that he was being added to the tour and he would be at the press conference. I had called Jimmy Hart from Tel Aviv the first night we were there because once again the WWF were running Hogan's photo in the newspaper and stating he would be on the next WWF tour there, and he wouldn't be. Again Hogan's lawyers intervened and had them pull his picture from the ads. They took that to mean Hogan would be coming to Israel, just not for them.

Moshe was so enraged at the audacity of the WWF and Mama Concerts that he actually wanted to book Hogan for the tour. When I told him it would probably cost him a fortune, he said he would cancel the three Tel Aviv shows at the 10,000-seat Tel Aviv Sports Palace (now called the Nokia Arena) and instead make one big show at the 42,000-seat Ramat Gan Stadium, which is the national soccer stadium. He said that for wrestling or boxing they could put 55,000 people in the stadium and charge more money than they could at the arena.

When I asked him how much he was willing to pay Hogan for the one show, I nearly fell over when he said, "$700,000 . . . paid in advance." I promised Moshe I would reach out to Hogan when I arrived home, and I did.

Amazingly Hogan turned down the huge offer. As Jimmy Hart would later explain to me, Hulk was concerned that some anti-Americans would consider him representative of American values and that he would be a target. Even though Moshe guaranteed 24-hour armed bodyguards, Hogan did not want to take the risk. Even if $7 million had been offered he would have turned down the deal. Sometimes money isn't everything.

Although the trip was mostly business, we did get a chance to do a little socializing and take in a few of the sights — and have a few laughs too. During our drive to Jerusalem, the woman who was chaperoning us kept bragging about this one Arab restaurant where they served a dish called "mixed grille," which was a local favorite. Being game to try new things, I tried it for lunch. As I was eating it, I recognized one of the flavors as chicken liver, which, being Jewish, was familiar to me. But when I couldn't quite place my finger on the other tastes, I asked the girl, pointing with my fork, "What are the rest of these ingredients?"

At first she didn't know the English words and then remembered them: "Ah . . . hearts, brains, gizzards, stomachs . . ."

Faster than you can say Pepto-Bismol, I put down my fork and covered my plate with my napkin as Kevin and Kim both blurted out huge belly laughs.

"I'm done," I said, feeling quite ill and turning several shades of green. "Let's head back to Tel Aviv."

Two of the funniest moments of the trip revolved around Kim. The first was at our press conference. One of the reporters asked "Penelope" why her hair was half blonde and half pink. When she responded that her mother had mated with a flamingo, I thought I would bust a gut, not because of what she said but because the reporters just stopped in their tracks and weren't sure how to translate what she was saying. Oddly enough, that's the quote from her that made it on the evening news.

The second moment was when we went to the Western Wall, in Jerusalem's Old City. The wall is sometimes referred to as the Wailing Wall and is an important Jewish religious site that is also significant to Islam, and Muslims refer to it as al-Buraq Wall. Just over half of the wall dates from the end of the Second Temple period, being constructed around 19 BCE by Herod the Great. The remaining layers were added from the seventh century onward. Millions of people from all around the world go to the wall every year to pray, and there is a much publicized practice of placing slips of paper containing written prayers to God into the crevices of the wall. Kim was in her Penelope outfit, with torn jeans and pink hair, and Kevin wore his orange prisoner jumpsuit. As we're walking through the security checkpoint, the looks on the faces of the Israeli army soldiers were priceless. They began pointing and laughing. Back in the states the workers would have played up the gimmick big time, but considering that we were on sacred ground and not accustomed to seeing police carrying Uzis, everyone kept their mouths shut and let the soldiers make all the fun that they wanted.

When I went up to the wall to place my note, I asked Kim if she was going too. Her response was, "Hell no! I'm not walking over there dressed like this. Do you think I want to be shot down by those machines guns?"

I suppose there is just something about a girl with pink hair that draws attention.

About a week after we got home and exactly three weeks before we were scheduled to leave for Israel, Moshe called to inform me he was canceling the tour. He just couldn't fight off the WWF, and he was worried that it would affect upcoming concerts he had with some major rock acts — concerts that would put him out of business if canceled.

I was devastated. So much time and work had gone into the project, and now

I had to call all of these people to cancel the trip. I felt my reputation was going to be shot. I called Hiro and asked him for his advice. Since he was the one who had originally advised me to give the boys payoffs that were equivalent to what they made in Japan, he suggested that, even though my contracts had clauses stating that if the tour were canceled they would be liable to refund the money, I should let them keep the money but make it clear that I was not obligated to do so. He explained that having a good reputation in the wrestling business meant more than anything else and that by showing them that I was on their side I could always count on them to do a favor for me because they would remember me for having allowed them to keep the money and not for having canceled the tour.

I was really torn about what to do, as I had given advances totaling $47,310. I knew that Craig would have said to demand the money back, but I had to think about what I was doing with Hiro and my aspirations for working in the business going forward. That money was almost as much a profit as what we would have made on the tour, and it definitely would have brought me completely out of my financial hole. I weighed my future with my present and made the decision to do what Hiro suggested.

Sigh!

While Craig and I divvied up some profit, and it certainly helped me pay off some of the huge debts I had accumulated, the money was nowhere near what it should have been. That $47,310 was an investment in my wrestling future, and only time would tell if that investment would pay off.

My life, my career has been like a roller coaster. I've either been an enormous success or just a down-and-out failure.

— Judy Garland (1922–1969)

TEN

1994

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

With Hiro Matsuda and Babylon's Vincent Battaglia (left) in Cannes, France after signing an agreement to bring WSW to Russian television

Life is a culmination of the past, an awareness of the present, an indication of a future beyond knowledge, the quality that gives a touch of divinity to matter.
— Charles Lindbergh (1902–1974)

Once upon a time I read something to the effect that a person's life is the summation of all the thoughts they've ever had and all the words they've ever spoken, that the course of their life was determined not only by what they thought but how they thought it, and that they could choose a different path and, therefore, a different outcome simply by changing the way they thought about things.

I often wondered if the things I was experiencing were a subconscious self-fulfilling prophecy based on the way I thought about things, the result of some cosmic alignment, some divine force guiding me or simply the result of a random set of circumstances. Whatever it was, 1994 was the culmination of many things for me — a juncture that defined my place in the history of the wrestling business.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, traces of my DNA can be found scattered across various elements of wrestling's past, from what the National Wrestling Alliance is today to what Extreme Championship Wrestling was when it first started.

Shortly after the first of the year, with the Israeli mess still fresh in my memory and the roller coaster still traveling at breakneck speed, things started to unravel at my regular job. Shelly Schermer's power struggle with Charles Scheuerman was in full swing, and somehow I was stuck in the middle because I was the company's lone syndication representative. Over the course of a few weeks, Shelly and Charles took turns at the helm of MFG until all business was put on hold pending the outcome of the penny stock deal being brokered by a group in Texas. I would not be getting a steady paycheck until the issue was resolved. I couldn't help but think that MFG was becoming a carbon copy of the CTN/Larry Glauber fiasco, except neither Shelly nor Charles were hanging curtains in the company's boardroom, and no one was greeting bankers barefooted.

Although I was still working for Hiro and his new company, my job with him was commission-only, and it would take a few more months to establish any semblance of ongoing business that would guarantee a specific and reliable income. I had a few commission dollars due to me, but it would hardly compare with what I had been earning at MFG. The so-called $40,000 in commissions I had calculated in Cannes was a pipe dream unless I could actually close some of those sales, and that just wasn't happening. I learned pretty quickly that international television program buyers were just as full of crap as people in the wrestling business.

I felt right at home. But now what?

Well, if you've ever seen *The Honeymooners*, then you probably remember Alice Kramden complaining about her husband Ralph's harebrained schemes. Every time Jackie Gleason's character tried a new venture, whether it was the "chef of the future" kitchen utensil, glow-in-the-dark wallpaper or low-cal pizza, the result was failure . . .

Welcome to Harebrained Scheme No. 542: Howard flies to Atlanta to sit down with Eric Bischoff to pitch a reorganization plan.

Shortly after Eric Bischoff was named by Time Warner Executive Bill Shaw as vice president of World Championship Wrestling, which was bleeding money by

the truckload, I arranged a meeting with Eric through Bob Dhue and presented a nine-page reorganization plan to change WCW into WTW — World Team Wrestling.

I was brazen enough to put forward a change in corporate strategy from a wrestling promotion company to a wrestling management company. The idea was to bring in "franchise" owners, and I even identified individuals who had shown an interest in wrestling previously (Eddie Einhorn, Merv Griffin, Wayne Huizenga and Donald Trump), suggested the league's franchise structure (regional teams set up in areas that were once epicenters of the old wrestling territories — New York, Chicago, California, Georgia, Florida, Oregon, Minnesota, Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Missouri and New England), outlined team structures (seven male, one female and one manager) and showed how bookings could work (coordinated through a league office) and how television could be formatted (transforming their then six hours of weekly syndicated programming into regional showcases).

While Bob Dhue, who sat in on the meeting, liked the idea, thinking it had merit enough to discuss further and commenting aloud that he thought it would reduce the company's risk to near zero, Eric thought it was horrible, saying Mike Graham had pitched him something similar, except his idea wasn't as thought out as mine and was more "roller derby–ish."

I didn't know it at the time but Bischoff and Dhue had a bit of a behind-the-scenes struggle going on over the direction of WCW, and not long after that meeting Dhue resigned from the company. Easy E had other, more grandiose, plans. But our meeting put me on his radar screen, and over time our interactions ran the gamut, from cordial to cocky to downright nasty.

Before long I was working for my brother Marty's travel agency again, except he had closed his retail storefront and now exclusively booked wholesale travel out of his house. The problem was some weeks were only part-time. It was better than not working at all, but once again I found myself behind financially. On the home front Sharon and I still lived with my in-laws, and our relationship was being pushed to the limit. It's one thing to ride a roller coaster of your own accord, but it's something else to drag people along for the ride. Our marriage was struggling.

While I continued working for Hiro, Kevin Sullivan reached out to me and wanted to introduce me to this guy in Philadelphia he was wrestling for on the weekends. He thought I could help the guy's company get on some television stations. The introduction was Kevin's way of thanking me for booking him and Nancy on the Israeli tour, even though it had been canceled. This guy also happened to be Jewish.

Tod Gordon was the owner of Eastern Championship Wrestling, a fairly new company that had formed out of the remains of what Joel Goodhart ran in the

Philly market under the Tri-State Wrestling Alliance banner. Tod had been Goodhart's financial backer, but because Goodhart overbooked with too much talent, nearly every TWA show lost money. So in 1992 Tod bought his partner out and renamed the promotion, even becoming a member of the National Wrestling Alliance and working at arm's length with future rival Dennis Coralluzzo.

Not long after Tod took complete control he had a falling out with his booker, Eddie Gilbert, who previously had a successful run booking for Bill Watts but had started showing signs of drug abuse and instability. To replace Gilbert, Tod turned to Paul Heyman, who had had a nice run in WCW as manager Paul E. Dangerously. While Paul had some fresh and exciting ideas, he was still a bit of a greenhorn when it came to booking. He frequently asked for Kevin's advice — Sullivan had vast experience booking Florida, San Francisco, Hawaii and Japan. It was Kevin's idea, not Paul's, to create the fast-paced, extreme style that would become the trademark of ECW suggesting they use Japan's FMW (Frontier Martial-Arts Wrestling) and W*ING promotions as the blueprint for a new American brand. Paul's first show as Tod's booker was NWA Ultra Clash '93 on September 18th at Viking Hall, the bingo parlor in South Philadelphia that would come to be known as the ECW Arena by its small but super-loyal fan base. Even today, despite the building's name officially changing to New Alhambra Sports and Entertainment Center in 2004 (later shortened to New Alhambra Arena in 2006 and Alhambra Arena in 2008) ECW loyalists still refer to it as the ECW Arena.

After just a few conversations, Tod offered to fly me to Philadelphia so we could meet face-to-face and I could observe firsthand the revolution in the business that was taking shape. Both he and Kevin tried to explain to me what to expect, but I had to see it with my own eyes and feel the electricity. There was no way I could have prepared for what I was about to witness.

I flew into Philly the night before the show and met up in the morning with Kevin and Nancy. At breakfast they introduced me to Sherri Martel. I was struck by how quiet she was, nothing at all like her character. I don't know if it was because that's the way she was offstage or because she didn't know me, but it was odd.

While the Sullivans went to the local gym, I met with Tod. We spent the day talking about how I could help his fledgling company; I had syndicated movies to television stations and become friendly with several of the local program directors. The show was already on SportsChannel Philadelphia, and Tod wanted to expand ECW's base of operations into New Jersey and the surrounding states. I had some ideas, and when I explained how the stations wouldn't pay for the programming but might take it on barter, he understood. He didn't want to pay a station to air the show as he had heard the WWF and WCW were doing. I assured him that any

stations I got for him would be 100 percent bartered. Knowing I wasn't going to work for him for free, we agreed on a monthly fee, and by the time I got to the arena a deal was in place.

I pulled Kevin to the side and told him about the arrangement I had made — $2,000 a month to syndicate ECW's television show. I told Kevin I would give him a 25 percent cut for hooking me up. While he said it was not necessary, he thanked me. At one point in the afternoon, before any of the workers showed up, Kevin disappeared into a private area with Tod to have a "meeting," and when they emerged about 15 minutes later, Kevin had some white residue on his nose.

"Good meeting?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Everything's fine."

"I bet." I then made a faux wiping motion of my nose to let Kevin know he had something there. He quickly wiped away the cocaine that been left behind. I shook my head and nervously chuckled. He grinned like a kid who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

As the afternoon progressed, the workers started arriving for the show, and at various points both Kevin and Tod introduced me to different guys around the large storage area that served as the dressing room. I generally kept to myself off to the side but ended up spending most of the night talking with Sabu (Terry Brunk), Tommy Dreamer (Tommy Laughlin) and the Tasmaniac (Peter Senerchia). This was the first time I had ever met Sabu, and it would also be the first time I saw him work. I knew Sabu was the nephew of the Sheik (Ed Farhat), and when I was putting the tour of Israel together, Kevin kept pushing him and Tazz on me for some of the undercard spots, saying the guys were great workers. Kevin couldn't understand why Sabu wasn't working for either the WWF or WCW and admitted that it was probably politics that kept him from getting a spot. Tommy and Tazz, meanwhile, remembered me as being a friend of Tony Rumble, another close friend of Kevin's, who had booked them while working for Mario Savoldi's ICW (Tommy wrestled as T.D. Madison) and for his own New England–based Century Wrestling Alliance.

This was also the first time I met Terry Funk. My first interaction with him was over the telephone, while I was putting together my initial talent list for Israel. Ted DiBiase recommended I speak with him, and within five minutes of talking I knew why he was so well liked by other wrestlers. Terry was well spoken, intelligent and 100 percent honest — something I can't say about others of his family bloodline. However, that first face-to-face was less than stellar. We spoke at length about the business, but it was after the show that I saw the real Terry Funk . . .

Oddly enough, I really didn't speak with Paul that night. Paul and I had met

previously, when he was working for WCW as a manager, but he didn't recall the occasion. I understood, considering the number of shows they used to do and that it had been at least three years earlier. Nevertheless, he was cordial and welcomed me on board.

Before the show started, Paul gathered everybody who was backstage into the dressing room and gave a motivational speech. He talked about the growth of the company and what their plans were for expansion. He mentioned a couple of local promoters by name that had joined them, and when he mentioned my name as being part of the company to help them increase their television coverage I was pretty surprised.

People who are in the business can tell a lot about a company by its locker room. This locker room was different than anything I had ever experienced. The atmosphere had almost a family feel. I noticed some of the veterans giving advice to some of the younger workers. Most of the guys were eagerly making suggestions to their peers about in-ring moves and what phrases might be best for interviews. From the main event veterans to the curtain-jerking rookies, there was a one-for-all-and-all-for-one attitude.

The show itself blew me away — not necessarily the in-ring product, which was very good as I recall, but because of how hot the crowd was. It was like I had stepped back in time to when I was a kid and experienced again how crazy the crowds were at Madison Square Garden, screaming and yelling for Bruno Sammartino. But these fans were almost a part of the show. They loved the unexpected, they rooted for heels, they booed the babyfaces, they applauded well-executed moves and when someone messed up in the ring, they would chant, "You fucked up! You fucked up!"

They seemed to be more tuned in to what was going on than the average crowd, and they seemed to know a little bit more about the business than perhaps they should have. I forget who coined the phrase "smart mark," but the vast majority of the crowd was just that — "smart" to the business. Not that they *really* were, mind you, but that's how they surely thought of themselves.

There was one match that really stuck out. Sabu worked against Terry Funk, and watching the stuff he did with a chair and a table, bouncing off the ropes with such speed and precision, simply left my mouth agape. Watching Terry do a moonsault was the icing on the cake.

I got so excited and inspired by what I witnessed that after the show I went to Tod and told him that he needed to do some ECW shows down in Florida.

"Just get us on television and we'll talk about that," he responded.

The same camaraderie I had seen in the ECW dressing room was present at the

hotel bar, and that's where I got to see the real Funker in action.

Terry went from table to table finishing everybody's drink. If it had alcohol in it, he drank it. "What are you having?" he'd ask.

"Whisky Sour," one of the boys answered. He picked up the drink and downed it in one gulp.

"What are you having?" he asked another.

"Tequila," he answered. He picked up that drink and downed it too.

He did this several times. When Tod finally asked him what he wanted to drink, Terry responded with a smirk and held up his hand motioning for Tod to stop, "That's okay," he said, "I'm good." The remark got a little pop from the group at the table: Shane Douglas, Curtis Hughes, Kevin and Nancy, Tazz, Dreamer, Sandman and Sherri. To me it was the definitive Funk moment. When he worked, he worked hard, and when he played, he still "worked" hard. I suppose it's one of the enduring qualities that makes him a true legend.

I was excited about the opportunity I had with Tod, and between what he would pay me and what I was earning at Marty's travel agency, even part time, I was doing okay. Plus I still had a bunch of sales irons in the fire for Hiro, and I knew it would be just a matter of time before something clicked there too. My wife, however, was not thrilled with the prospect of me working with another wrestling company, jogging my memory about what had happened the last time I worked with someone — it was months before I got the money I was owed. When I assured her Tod Gordon was not like Herb Abrams she reminded me, "I've heard that before."

Sharon was growing tired of the promises and the disappointments that would come when I was not able to deliver. She wanted us to be in our own place, and there was always something that prevented us from getting there. I assured her again that it would only be a few more months. While she said she understood, deep down I knew she didn't believe me. I knew that the only way to prove to her that we would get back into our own place was to get enough money together to make the move.

In a relatively short period of time I came through for Tod. I was not only able to get ECW on the air in their own backyard on a group of New Jersey cable stations, but I got them on regular broadcast stations in Philadelphia and in Atlantic City. I was also able to get them on the air in Detroit and Tampa. Although I tried to get them on both the Sunshine Network and local stations in Miami and Orlando, I couldn't get them into those markets without paying the stations. In addition to the domestic stations, I was able to license their show internationally — 13 episodes were packaged to Sumitomo Corporation for cable television in Japan.

Meanwhile, Kevin had been suggesting that I run a show in the Florida Keys, not realizing that my financial situation wouldn't enable me to do so. He decided to put on a live event himself in a place called Tavernier, in the upper Keys. Because he and Wylie Sacks (Steve Collins) were good friends and they knew a lot of people in the area, Kevin brought him in as his partner. While they asked me to help them sell sponsorships to local businesses, I really didn't know anyone in the area and wasn't in a position to do telephone sales. I offered to go to the show and lend my support with whatever they needed on the day, but that was about it. They asked Craig to ring announce.

The night before the show I headed down to the Keys, where Wylie and his family had a three-bedroom condominium that they used as a retreat. Several times I joined Wylie and Kim when they went down for the weekend, just to get away. On this particular weekend I would stay in one guest room while Kevin and Nancy would stay in the other. But when I got down there, I found out another guest was going to be staying with them too, and Kevin and Nancy would be sleeping on Wylie's boat for the night.

Just as I got to the house, Wylie was unpacking groceries and sprung the news on me.

"Who else is staying here?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said with this evil little grin on his face. Wylie left the room to go get more groceries out of the car.

With Kim down at the boat with Kevin and Nancy and Wylie out at the car, I stood in the living room by myself. That's when I saw the person who would also be staying the night.

Oh, shit!

Of all the workers who was booked on the card . . . my luck meant that it was none other than Dick Slater. The last time I had spoken to Slater he had wanted to shove his fist down my throat. I hoped, no, prayed for the best.

Slater stepped inside the living room and stopped dead in his tracks. He glanced left and right, like a gunslinger checking out his surroundings before drawing his firearm. He slowly walked toward me, stopping just short of coming nose to nose with me.

"Howard," he said, seemingly measuring me up. There was a long pause. "How the hell are you doing?" he asked, extending his hand and shooting me a smile.

I grabbed his hand and shook it firmly. "I'm doing great, Dick. How are you?"

"I'm doing great," he said.

And he was. It had been a few years since the incident with Luna, and he was happily over the situation and had a new girlfriend, who had nothing to do with

the wrestling business. He actually seemed happy. Every time I had seen him previously, he had this depressed look on his face.

The show itself was a financial success, and afterward Craig and I started to talk about doing another show together. For me, watching the ECW show live and then seeing Kevin and Wylie do a show that was successful was like dangling a hypodermic needle in front of a junkie. Everything in my mind knew that doing a show would be a bad idea, but I needed that fix.

I called Tod and tried to convince him to let me promote a couple of ECW shows for him in Florida, but he was still on the fence as to whether or not they should venture outside Philadelphia. Tod knew that in order to expand the company, they would need to run somewhere else. But whenever they tried running someplace other than Philly they bombed, so they were not yet willing to take the chance on Florida.

By early April, Craig and I had decided we would do a big show during the summer, but instead of doing a women's show we would do a men's show. We had run one men's show locally at a Jewish Temple and done pretty well, so we figured it was time to go all out. We brought Dan Druckman in as a third partner. I would not be putting up any money, just my time, and, as before, I worked out a deal that if the show made money I made money. All we needed was a location.

I was also making a little headway for World Superstars of Wrestling and had several licensing agreements lined up for Hiro, but I couldn't close the really big sale. We had ongoing contracts for Hong Kong and the Middle East in place, but the big markets, like the United Kingdom and Germany, were elusive. I knew Germany's Deutsches Sportfernsehen (DSF) was paying WCW about $10,000 a week for their show, and if we could get a deal like that we'd be rocking and rolling. Then a phone call came that changed everything for us.

The previous October in Cannes I had met a guy by the name of Bud Schaffer, who owned a company called Media Entertainment based out of Palm Springs, California. His company packaged low-budget feature films to international broadcasters, similar to what I did with MFG in the states, and we had met to discuss his company representing the MFG film library because he had so many buyers. At the time he had zero interest in wrestling, but, like any good salesman, he had kept my name in the back of his mind.

One Monday morning I got a phone call from Bud asking me if WSW had contracts in place for the United Kingdom, France and Germany. While I had been exchanging faxes with ITV in the U.K., I couldn't get them to commit. DSF was interested in adding the show to complement WCW, but they were dragging their feet. I had no warm leads for France, so I told him that all three markets were available.

Through his film buyer at TFI in France, Bud had learned that Eurosport, TFI's sister station that had a footprint all across Europe, was unhappy with the WWF's programming because Titan was giving them the same show that was being broadcast on Sky Television in the U.K. When Eurosport asked for an original program the WWF told them they didn't have one. They originally wanted to go to WCW since they were doing a lot of business with Time Warner, but they ran into the same issue with WCW's show being on DSF, another direct competitor of Eurosport. When Bud asked me how soon we could get a show to Paris, Hiro and I took a leap of faith and sent Eurosport several episodes we had in the can, without a contract in place.

That leap worked. The tapes got to Paris, and on Wednesday night World Superstars of Wrestling debuted on Eurosport. The management at Eurosport was so impressed with our willingness to work with them to meet their deadline that they rewarded WSW with a 52-week contract worth just over $230,000. However, while it was great for the company and would lead to more lucrative contracts, I didn't get any commission out of the sale since that went to Bud and his company. WSW might have been growing, but I was still teetering financially. I had no idea how long my deal with ECW would last, so there were many things up in the air. A big show could potentially be a nice windfall for me.

While Craig and I were in the middle of looking for a place to do the big summer show, I got a call from Tom Nash. Tom was living in New Jersey and wrestling for Dennis Coralluzzo. Tom was trying to talk Dennis into running some shows in Florida and wanted to know if I would be willing to work with him. I told Tom I was already working with ECW, but I'd be willing to talk with Dennis. Next thing I knew I got a call from Dennis.

Dennis told me he did the majority of his shows as fundraisers and sold tickets through telemarketing campaigns. When I asked him what he would need me for, he said to do all the legwork, like getting the buildings, setting up media coverage and all the things he couldn't do sitting 1,200 miles away. I told Dennis I appreciated his thinking of me, but I also told him that I was already working with Tod Gordon to bring Eastern Championship Wrestling to Florida and that I had my own shows under the Florida Major League Wrestling banner, including the big summer show Craig and I were planning. Dennis didn't press the issue and he told me if I changed my mind to let him know. He also said he could get talent for the big show I was planning because he worked with everyone in the Northeast, so I should let him know if I needed his help.

By May Craig had come up with the idea of doing the big show at the Miami Metrozoo. Although they didn't have a building where we could stage the matches,

they did have an undeveloped outdoor area that could be cordoned off. There was no seating, however, which meant we would have to bring in bleachers and chairs; no lighting, which meant we would have to do the show during the day; and no electricity, which meant we would have to bring our own sound system.

Not one to pass on a challenge, Craig decided to go for it. Logistically it would be a nightmare, but we knew that if we did it right it would be a huge success. We remembered what Warren Lewis had done by selling program advertising in New Jersey, and that's what we emphasized. Aside from Craig, Dan and I selling ads and getting sponsors, we had our network of friends and family members helping us as best they could.

As we got into the early summer, we lined up the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis as our charitable recipient. The Miami Project, the world's largest, most comprehensive spinal cord injury research center, was founded in 1985 by Dr. Barth A. Green and former Miami Dolphin and NFL Hall of Fame linebacker Nick Buoniconti after Nick's son Marc sustained a spinal cord injury during a college football game. Because the Miami Project was such a high-profile South Florida charity, we were able to get an enormous amount of press coverage and corporate participation.

While we were moving along with our show, Kevin left his part-time gig at ECW to start working full-time with WCW. After many discussions between Tod and me, he finally agreed that Eastern Championship Wrestling should try to promote a couple of shows in Florida. He gave me the green light to do a show in Tampa that would be promoted off their television programs.

Throughout July we did a publicity blitz for the Miami Metrozoo show, which was now known as — and with apologies to George Foreman and Muhammad Ali — the Rumble in the Jungle. We had our talent everywhere: on local television shows, local radio stations and even at sports memorabilia shows for photo opportunities. "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan posed with Green Bay Packer football legend Bart Starr and Pittsburg Pirates baseball great Willie Stargell at one show, while Penelope Paradise posed with football great Joe Namath at another.

Once all the talent was booked for Miami, I began concentrating on the September ECW show in Tampa. The show would be held at the Florida State Fairgrounds, where the Florida office ran for years after being evicted from the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory. As I was doing in Miami for the show Craig and I were putting on, I was able to line up a number of prime media appearances for the ECW crew, including spots on *Good Morning Tampa Bay* and the then fresh, cutting-edge *Bubba the Love Sponge Show*.

In an effort to maximize their transportation costs, Tod decided to add a second

show for the weekend, and Dory Funk Jr. and his wife, Marti, would promote an ECW show in their hometown of Ocala. This would be the first time I would meet Marti and work with the Funks on a business level.

I was able to get Little Caesar's Pizza to sponsor the event in Miami, and I was able to get Domino's Pizza involved to do a flyer campaign in both Central Florida cities. I was applying the same formula to the ECW shows that we were using for the show in Miami. Although I wasn't concentrating on Ocala, if what I did had a residual benefit for what the Funks were doing all the better, as the most important thing was that the two ECW shows were successful.

Under a hot Florida sun on Sunday, August 7th, we presented the Rumble in the Jungle at Miami Metrozoo with a double main event of Duggan versus King Kong Bundy (who I booked through Dennis) managed by Sir Oliver Humperdink and Tito Santana versus Greg Valentine. Although Steve Keirn was supposed to work the show as both himself and the World Famous Wrestling Clown, he was unable to appear, so Lou Perez did double duty. Also on the card was Bugsy McGraw, Corporal Kirshner, Phi Delta Slam and Dave Heath (in his WWF jobber gimmick the Black Phantom).

The show drew nearly 2,500 paid fans, which for an independent group at the time was unheard of. But to be fair, we did more than just a wrestling show, it was an event. We had all sorts of local media personalities involved, such as former Miami Dolphin and local radio host "Mad Dog" Jim Mandich, and Craig brought in kids rides, face painters and all sorts of ancillary vendors to create a carnival-type atmosphere. We even had someone in a Barney costume (as in the purple dinosaur) walking around and interacting with the kids, and we placed Bundy family look-alikes from TV's *Married With Children* at ringside to root for their "cousin" and do the famous Bundy Wave.

While the show made some money and each of us took a little something home after the expenses were deducted, considering how much time we collectively spent on the project, the risk was not worth the reward. While it was a fun show to put together, it wasn't exactly a great business model.

However, there was one person in the crowd who thought it was and approached Dan about getting involved. Sixty-one-year-old Homi "Peter" Patel lived in Miami with his wife and two children and sold insurance. However, about 25 years earlier he and a partner had promoted professional wrestling in Bombay, India, with an aging Dara Singh as their main event performer. For years Peter had wanted to get into promoting wrestling in the U.S., but he had never seen a viable opportunity, nor did he have the type of money needed to take a legitimate shot at it. Over the past couple of years, however, he and a fellow Indian-born U.S.

citizen, Adi "Alex" Dubash, had become friends through their local church, as they were followers of Zoroastrianism. Alex was bankrolling several successful businesses and had agreed to back Peter if he could find a company to work with.

Within 10 days of a meeting between Peter, Dan, Craig and I, a new company was formed, with all of us plus Alex as partners. Because I was the only one who could dedicate the majority of his time to the project, I was the only paid employee of the company. Everyone else would contribute what time they could and be paid based on any profits made. Alex provided the financing, and Peter was put in charge of me. We even opened up a small office in an executive building, which Craig referred to as the "NWA Florida Closet" because the room that held my desk, computer, phone and fax machine was so small. Although Alex and Peter knew of my commitments to ECW and WSW going in, I immediately scheduled a first show for Halloween night to let them know I was serious about making the new venture work.

Around the time the ink was drying on our new partnership agreement, word was getting around the business about how well our Miami show drew, and I got a call from Dennis to join the NWA. Although the name probably didn't mean diddly-squat anywhere else, in Florida it was the equivalent of opening a hamburger joint with the name McDonald's attached to it. It was a well-recognized brand name that had a ton of history and tradition associated with it, so quicker than you can say Lou Thesz I had Peter cut a check for $500 and sent it off to the organization's secretary and legal counselor, Bob Trobich.

With the two ECW shows only about a month away I got a call from Tod to change all the posters and flyers we planned to print because the company would be changing its name. While we were able to stop the 5,000 flyers, the 200 posters had already been printed. Under instructions from Tod, the posters that had Eastern Championship Wrestling on them were destroyed, and new ones with the name Extreme Championship Wrestling were printed. Even though their ECW moniker would remain intact, the acronym would have a whole new meaning.

I asked Tod, "What kind of a name is that?"

He filled me in on their plan: Shane Douglas would trash the NWA title and carve out a niche for ECW as the anti-establishment wrestling promotion. At that point I let Tod know I had just joined the NWA, unaware there was any heat between him and Dennis. Realizing the position I was in, Tod asked me to keep the plan quiet since they had a lot riding on it. I felt my loyalty was to Tod so I didn't mention anything to either Dennis or Bob.

On August 27th, in one of the greatest screw jobs in the history of the industry, Shane Douglas threw down the NWA world title belt and called the National

Wrestling Alliance a "dead organization." Although the action was initially planned by Paul Heyman and Tod, according to an in-depth interview conducted by WrestlingEpicenter.com with Shane, he was still undecided about throwing down the strap as Paul had warned him many people he grew up loving might peg him a backstabber if he followed through with it.

Shane said what made the decision easy was Dennis's commentary at the time. Shane claimed that Dennis Coralluzzo went on a radio show and told people not to book him because he would no-show and was considered a "bad risk." Shane couldn't recall ever no-showing an event and said Dennis was talking about a booking he no-showed because he was worried about being paid. As Shane described the incident, the promoter kept backing out of parts of his agreement and at one point wanted Shane to drive instead of fly, as initially planned. Shane said he told the promoter to take his name off the show and not to book him again.

When Dennis showed up at the ECW Arena and stuck to Shane's side, as he described it, "like a dingleberry," and wanted him to sign a contract, Shane decided to move forward with the plan to trash the NWA belt using his father's theory of "doing right by the people that do right by you."

Bob Trobich might recall history a little differently, in that Tod Gordon double-crossed him by giving him his word that there would be no tomfoolery despite their disdain for Dennis. Tod has admitted that the angle was done not to hurt Bob but specifically to spite Coralluzzo because, as he said, "Dennis was trying to use us and went to the sheets [wrestling newsletters] to block the tournament from taking place." The wound to Bob's pride and ego was collateral damage.

Something else happened on August 27th that had a bit of an impact on me. Larry Simon, the Great Malenko, my first true mentor in the wrestling business, passed away at the age of 61 after a long bout with cancer. Being Jewish, he was buried the next day, and his service was a who's who of Florida wrestling, as some of his former students were in attendance, the most prominent being Sean Waltman, who came to the funeral with Randy Savage. One of the things that will always stick out in my mind about that day was watching men like Hiro Matsuda and Gordon Solie unable to keep the tears from rolling down their faces. After the services I told Jody and Shelley (Joe and Dean Malenko) how much their father had meant to me and how kind he had been toward me.

But life goes on. While working on both the ECW show and our Fort Lauderdale Halloween show, I began looking at the prospects for an overseas tour. Alex had a couple of business associates in the United Arab Emirates who were interested in bringing a couple of shows to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and, knowing I had contacts in Israel, he liked the idea of doing shows in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. In addition,

through my friend Holmes Stoner, who I met while putting the WWOW television show together, I learned that there was some interest in bringing a wrestling tour to Vietnam and Cambodia. Alex was willing to put up the money to underwrite the tours in order to establish a foothold in all three markets. While we would collectively flush out leads by visiting these places firsthand, I first had to concentrate on Tampa.

Extreme Championship Wrestling was poised to take Florida by storm. But instead of a hurricane blowing in from the great northern city of Brotherly Love, ECW came in to the Sunshine State like a subtle breeze. Despite all the press coverage I got for them and the fact that they had decent TV ratings in the market, the Tampa show drew poorly for a Friday night, with less than 250 people paid. Before the show Dory and Marti showed Tod and Paul a four-page newspaper spread about the live ECW event that they were able to get printed in the *Ocala Banner*. I don't know if Tod and Paul were just trying to put the Funks over or what, but at one point Tod turned to me and said something like, "This is the way you promote a show."

That pissed me off. I knew how much I had done for them, but still, I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to make any waves. Whatever money I was getting from them at that point I wanted to last, so I played the subservient role for the night.

About halfway through the show, however, Tod came over to where Craig and I were standing at the back of the arena — I had dragged Craig along since it didn't seem right to do a road trip without him — and he was visibly upset. Tod claimed the show was an embarrassment to them. He told me that if anyone asked me what the attendance was to say 450. Craig and I had just done a rough head count and came up with 230. When it came time to settle with the building, Tod told me to go to the box office and settle up because he "wanted to watch the main event."

On the way to the box office Craig commented something to the effect of, "Perhaps if he was as concerned with the number of tickets he sold as he was about his main event, maybe they would've drawn more." Craig did have a point, as we both knew firsthand what happens when as an owner you don't take a direct role in ticket sales.

After the show I met up with Tod and Paul in Paul's hotel room, where after watching the last of Herb Abrams's *Blackjack Brawl* we talked business. Even though Tod had made me feel guilty as hell earlier in the evening, saying the show was "an embarrassment," Paul softened the blow by acknowledging my efforts with the local media and said he understood the challenges that come along with promoting a new city. Surprisingly, he cited the same challenge they had when

promoting other cities in New Jersey, claiming, "it's a dice roll."

Not surprisingly, however, Paul brought up my involvement with the NWA and wanted to know why I would want to work with "that buffoon Dennis Coralluzzo" when I was working with them. Although I explained my reason for joining the NWA, Paul responded by saying, "So promote under the NWA name. They have no money. They won't come after you. Look what we did. They're not coming after us." Although he was probably right, that wasn't my style.

I knew Tod was more disappointed than Paul was because that's who I had forged a relationship with, but, for the business that I was going to do in Florida with Alex and Peter, the NWA name had too much value to discard. As pissed as I had been earlier in the night over some of the comments Tod had made, that's how pissed off I knew they were that I would be working with Dennis.

The next night, in sharp contrast to the Tampa show, the Ocala show drew a little more than 600 paid, and the Funks did a great job getting people into the building. But what was good for the Funks was bad for me, as it fed into the notion that I was simply not a strong enough promoter for ECW. While I didn't buy that, I knew without anyone having to tell me that my first ECW promoted show would also be my last.

While I still maintained a relationship with ECW, it became strained. I knew I had to deliver something of substance that would keep me in their good graces. I later learned in a telephone conversation with Kevin Sullivan that Tod couldn't understand how I could turn my back on "my own kind" — Tod and Paul are Jewish, while Dennis was Italian.

With October came another trip to Cannes, as Hiro and I once again participated at MIPCOM. This time around World Superstars of Wrestling would not be sharing a booth but would have its own display. Prior to going over I had arranged meetings with a number of program directors, and the prognosis for making some sales seemed quite good.

At home, Sharon and I had a long discussion, and I swore to her that, between what I was making with Peter and Alex and what I was potentially going to make with Hiro, we would be out of her parents' house and into our own place before the end of the year. Once again, however, I knew she didn't believe me. How many times can a boy cry wolf?

Looking back, Sharon was very patient. She put up with a lot of crap and her skepticism had nothing to do with my intentions. It was fueled by the underlying lack of trust. To complicate matters, it wasn't just a question of whether she trusted me per se or if the trust between us had broken down, but whether she could trust me to be truthful with myself. Unfortunately, my wife had good reason to doubt

whether or not I was being honest with myself.

In 1983, shortly after getting married, I lied to my new bride. And it wasn't just a little white lie, but a lie that would set the tone for the distrust that would rear its ugly head 11 years later.

I was out of work, and it began to take its toll on me. I completely lost faith in myself and I didn't know how to get it back. With each freelance rejection letter I received or job I didn't get after an interview, my self-confidence plummeted further. So one day, in a moment of weakness I am not proud of, I lied to my wife about a potential job simply to feel better about myself — a job with singer Billy Joel, probably because his name was on my mind.

Because the lie made me feel better about myself, I perpetuated it. Every time I got turned down by a potential employer in the real world my fantasy world progressed. It got so bad that at some point my make believe relationship with Joel crossed from potential employer to friend.

When Billy Joel's 1983 tour was announced, one of the stops was Hollywood, Florida. I was royally screwed. Sharon and others were soon asking me about tickets and whether I was going to see Joel while he was in town. I was so deep into the lie that I was afraid to confess, so I not only bought two tickets, but I wrote a very detailed letter to Joel's then business manager, Jeff Schock.

A couple of days before the concert I received a phone call from Schock's assistant, who told me that Schock had passed the letter to Billy Joel, and that he agreed to "do something" at the concert to acknowledge me. His assistant also told me two tickets would be left under my name the night of the concert. I now had four tickets, so my oldest sister Terri sat with Sharon, while my friend Andy Sackheim sat with me in the nosebleed section.

About three-quarters of the way through the show, Joel looked across the crowd and said, "Howard Brody, I know where you are. This one's for you." And with that he sang, "Tell Her About It." His lyrics resonated loud and clear.

In one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, when Sharon and I got home from the concert, I sat her down and told her the truth. She was disappointed beyond words but understood and forgave me. I promised her I would never lie to her again, and in all the time I was married to her I never once broke that promise.

So when I kissed Sharon goodbye the day I left for France and reminded her we would soon be in a place of our own and saw disappointment in her eyes, I knew it was just a matter of time before it would be over.

While in France Hiro and I continued to bond, I did great business, signing both ESPN Asia and the South African Broadcasting Corporation to 52-week contracts. I was so excited by the sales that I called Sharon to give her the good news,

but on the phone she seemed annoyed and distant. Being 6,000 miles away didn't help, and now the only thing on my mind wasn't writing more business but getting home to my wife so we could go out together and find a place to live.

I couldn't wait to get home, but when I finally did, I wished I hadn't. Sharon had packed my belongings and wanted me out of the house. I tried telling her we would finally be in our own place again, but it was too little too late.

Even though I was exhausted from the 14-hour trip and mentally beaten, I made a few phone calls and found myself living with my sister Phyllis and brother-in-law Jack. I remember that first night, lying on my nephew's water bed and wondering how the hell I had gotten myself into this situation while crying myself to sleep. Self-pity is a pretty ugly thing. That whole first week I wasn't much better than that first night.

Slowly though I started to get back on my feet and threw myself into my work.

After letting Hiro know of my situation, I phoned Alex and Peter to tell them what was going on. I then called Tod to bring him up to speed too, and to my utter astonishment he offered to move me to Philadelphia to work for him and ECW full-time. The offer took me by surprise, and I have never forgotten Tod's compassion. It is that empathy that has enabled us to remain friends over these many years.

Now focused on work and determined to get into my own place by year's end, between WSW, ECW and the upcoming NWA Florida show on Halloween, I was working around the clock. I was sending out faxes to television stations around the world for WSW, reaching out to other program brokers for ECW and booking talent for the Halloween show.

I finally hit my first truly big score for ECW. While in France I had connected with a company called Powersports Video, who had come to the WSW booth looking to license our show for broadcast and cable on a worldwide basis excluding North America. They had represented Herb Abrams's UWF library, but because no new shows were being produced they needed product to fulfill existing and ongoing contracts. After I had Paul send them a show screener, I received an offer from Powersports to license 20 episodes of ECW. Tod was ecstatic, as the deal meant the company could potentially receive steady income from its television product.

The Halloween night NWA Florida Monster Mash show lost a little money, but it gave Peter and Alex an opportunity to see how we operated. Craig and I applied our blueprint and made it more than a wrestling show. We made the show kid-friendly, giving away bags of candy to all children 14 and under. We had a costume contest for the fans, and the best costume won a year's worth of Little Caesar's pizza. We even gave away hot dogs, popcorn, soda pop and cotton candy. We decorated the War Memorial Auditorium with Halloween favors, had jugglers and clowns walking

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The former Corporal Kirshner and future Gangrel don their Leather Face and Vampire Warrior gimmicks for Monsters in a Steel Cage

through the crowd and even had a band playing between matches and during intermission in a makeshift graveyard, complete with tombstones that carried the names of some of our rival promoters.

The show itself even had a Halloween slant to it, as the main events were Jake "The Snake" Roberts taking on Brutus Beefcake and Kevin Sullivan versus Cactus Jack (Mick Foley). We also booked a gimmick match called Monsters in a Steel Cage, which pitted Lucifer (Wiley Sacks) and Lord Humongous (Mark Benedict) against the Vampire Warrior (Dave Heath) and, for the first time ever in the U.S., Leather Face (Mike Kirshner), complete with his working chain saw. Never had I seen fans scared as much as they were when Kirshner came out with that chain saw going at full force. I had seen Abdullah the Butcher, the Sheik and George "The Animal" Steele all scare off a crowd, but nothing compared with this.

Once the show started it went off without a hitch, but it wasn't smooth sailing up to show time. About a week before the card Jake informed me he wouldn't be flying down for the show. He admitted to having reoccurring drug issues and didn't trust himself to be away from his wife, Cheryl, even for a few days. He asked if he could cash in the plane ticket I had sent to him and use the money for gasoline to drive down from Atlanta instead. I agreed and told him to bring the gas receipts with him so I would know how much extra to pay him for the difference between the two.

Headache number two was the call I got the morning of the show, from Ed Leslie (Beefcake). Ed had agreed to a $700 payoff. However, that was before he did this big angle on WCW television: he turned on longtime friend Hulk Hogan and went from being referred to as Brother Bruti to being known as the Butcher. Ed told me that he wanted a thousand dollars or he wouldn't show up. Normally I

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Jake the Snake gains the upper hand on the Butcher

would have told him to take a flying you know what and would have gotten someone like Duggan, Bundy or any one of a number of other guys to take his place, but how was I going to come up with someone on such short notice? I gave in, agreeing to his highway robbery. When I gave him his payoff I told him that I didn't appreciate his unprofessional behavior and I'd never book him again — to this day I have kept to my word. I told him that $300 would cost him thousands. I got some satisfaction years later, when he was out of work and called me looking for a booking on one of my Armory shows. I reminded him of how he had held me up and asked him not to call me again.

The third and final headache of the night came when Kevin no-showed. Nancy came to the building as booked, but Kevin was nowhere to be found. He sent a message with his wife that he would be stuck in Orlando on WCW business and couldn't get away. He was scheduled to work the next to the last match on the card, so I asked Steve Keirn, who had just finished wrestling against the Warlord dressed in his Wrestling Clown gimmick, to work as himself against Cactus. Under normal circumstances, when someone works double duty they usually work as themselves first and then change into their gimmick outfit. Although Steve was reluctant to do it, after I promised I would give him Kevin's pay, he washed up, changed and was ready to go.

Having switched the order of the last two matches on the card, the Jake-Beefcake match was brutal, not because it was violent but because it was so horrible. I wished I hadn't succumbed to Ed Leslie's demands because he was ruining the match. Jake tried his best to carry the guy, but he might as well have been working against a scarecrow. When they finally got out of the ring, Jake shot me an "I tried" look, and I thanked him for his efforts.

With Steve Keirn already in the ring for the final match, I wished Mick good luck as he walked past me, and his response was "We'll save your show." With that

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Referee Mickie Jay Henson checks to see if Steve Keirn is choking Cactus Jack

he and Keirn went out and gave a match right out of the old Florida office or, to put it in more modern terms, right out of the ECW playbook. The two not only fought in the ring but made it up on the stage and slugged it out in the "graveyard." Mick even picked up one of the tombstones, and when he smacked it over Keirn's head the whole crowd let out a unified "Ohhhhh!" Although the tombstone looked like concrete it was actually made of Styrofoam, but the crowd didn't know that and ate the spot alive. At the end Steve and Mick earned their money and, as promised, saved the show by ending it on a high note.

After the show was done and everyone got their pay, the partners held a brief meeting and Alex, who was bankrolling the deal, was pleased with the presentation of the show, even though he agreed we could've had more people in attendance. But now that he had got a taste of what we could do, he wanted to go full steam ahead with more shows and step up efforts to coordinate more overseas events. My mind was going a million miles a minute thinking of all the possibilities.

There was still one more thing to do before that particular night came to a close. Craig and I were invited to the wedding of Luna Vachon and Dave Heath, which took place at midnight. There were a handful of local workers there, along with Luna's fellow WWFer Alundra Blayze (Debra "Madusa" Miceli). Also on hand was a WWF video crew to capture the special moment for broadcast on WWF television

at a later date. In a way it seemed somewhat surreal, but it was a perfectly odd way to close out a very odd month.

Heading in to November I was supposed to travel with Peter to Vietnam and Cambodia to negotiate potential wrestling tours with the governments, but since the NWA annual meeting was scheduled for the same time, I canceled my plans to the Far East and instead went to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, while Alex went in my place to Ho Chi Minh City.

As the newest member of the National Wrestling Alliance, I played a very low-key role, meeting Dennis, Bob Trobich and Steve Rickard (from New Zealand) for the first time. Jim Crockett Jr. was supposed to be there too but never showed up, and shortly thereafter his membership was terminated because he failed to pay his annual dues.

For the most part I sat back and let Steve and Dennis sort things out. I remember that the NWA owed Bob a great deal of money for ongoing legal services and also owed the state of Iowa for fees pertaining to its corporate standing as a nonprofit entity. Crockett was not in attendance and Steve held proxies for his son Tony (Hawaii) and Ron and Larry O'Day (Australia), so we decided to forego electing a president since the membership was so small, and it was agreed that Dennis would call the shots since he was the most active member.

The only thing that came into question during the meeting was Dennis's selection for winning the NWA world title tournament, Chris Candido. With the calamity of the Shane Douglas incident still fresh in everyone's mind, especially for Dennis and Bob, Steve and I questioned Dennis's choice, having never seen Chris before. While I thought he was a very polite and cordial young man when I met him, I was struck by how short he was. At five foot eight and about 220 pounds, he looked more like a junior heavyweight than a heavyweight, and both Steve and I lobbied for Dennis to make another choice. Although Dennis said he would switch the finish if we insisted, he argued his case and convinced us that Chris was the guy. It turned out Chris was 100 percent loyal and a hell of a worker. So as planned, Chris Candido won the NWA world heavyweight title on November 19, 1994, beating Tracy Smothers in the finals of a tournament that primarily featured wrestlers from Jim Cornette's Smoky Mountain Wrestling. I had sent Lou Perez, the then NWA Florida champ, to participate in the tournament.

While I was doing business in New Jersey, learning about the politics of the NWA, Peter and Alex were meeting with Ho Huu Tuan, Vietnam's deputy chief of sport and learning about the politics of doing business with a communist government. I can't even tell you how many reams of paper it took just to get permission to have a meeting in Ho Chi Minh City. I got a company sponsor through my

friend Holmes, who was already doing business with the Vietnamese government, but we had to be sure that doing business with the communist country did not violate any U.S. laws.

When Peter returned to the States and Alex went on to Dubai, we had tentative dates from the Vietnamese government. They wanted us to do several shows in April, with the final event taking place on April 30th, as part of a sports festival in celebration of the 20th Anniversary of their revolution. We would be the first wrestling company ever to present live events in Vietnam.

Shortly after Thanksgiving and after a month of living with my sister and brother-in-law, I made good on my promise to move into a place of my own by the end of the year. It wasn't anything fancy, just a small one-bedroom apartment, but it was mine. I didn't have much time to celebrate, however, as Peter and I set off for the Middle East.

We arrived in Dubai and were met at the airport by Alex and someone named Iqbal, who worked for one of the people who would partner with us locally. Going through customs was a bit weird since it was nonexistent — for us. While most people had their baggage checked and were physically searched, they waved us right through because we had special government invitations and visas. I got a bit of a dirty look from the customs agent because I had an Israeli stamp in my passport from the previous year. I was told that under normal circumstances anybody who had traveled to Israel and had a stamp in their passport would be denied entrance to the UAE, but because I had that special government paper I was exempt.

When we got to the hotel I was a little nervous about turning over my passport. I had always been told never to let it out of my sight, but apparently in the UAE they want to keep track of you. I was even more nervous about the fact that Alex had hired an armed bodyguard to stand outside my hotel room door and escort me wherever I needed to go. Inside my room, I realized there was no toilet seat. Not that this was a local custom, but it seemed that the majority of toilet seats in the hotel, as well as a number of clock radios and television sets had been stolen by Russian tourists, supposedly to be resold back in Russia. Luckily I still had a TV, and when I turned it on, I was happy to find World Superstars of Wrestling playing on the local station.

After a shower and a nap, I was escorted by my bodyguard to a club owned by one of the reigning sheiks. My internal clock was so out of whack that I really couldn't enjoy myself, plus I couldn't breathe through all the hookah smoke. The entertainment consisted of five belly dancers, who on a scale from one to ten would only rate a three — combined. But it didn't seem to discourage the liquored-up crowd from flirting with the girls. When I questioned Alex about all the alcohol

that was flowing, being under the impression that Muslims didn't drink, he told me that for many Arab businessmen Dubai was like Las Vegas: "This is where everyone goes to get away," he said.

I called it an early night, eager to get started the next morning. After a late breakfast, Iqbal drove Peter and I to see facilities where we could hold matches. Some of the buildings were state-of-the-art places, but others were out of the Stone Age. Unfortunately, the one soccer stadium, which would have been perfect, was a "day only" facility that had no lights. The indoor facilities were either too small, seating only 3,000, or too big, seating 12,000. We calculated that, based on expenses and the price tickets could be sold for locally, in order to recoup any investment and make a profit we needed to be in an arena that held between 6,000 and 8,000. After much debate, we decided to cut the number of shows and use the larger facility, but that would mean bringing bigger names over, which I was trying to avoid.

Now that we had locations picked out, it was time to finalize the deals with the people who would promote locally for us. Our first meeting was with a sports promoter, but instead of going to his office we met him at a hookah shop. Not that I was nervous walking in there . . . but I was nervous walking in there. It looked like something from a James Bond film. It was filled with locals who had discolored, rotting or missing teeth, and others who wore fezzes. Not only was I the only American in the place, I guarantee I was the only Jew.

The guy never once looked me in the eye. He was always glancing at something else and at times seemed more interested in what he was smoking than doing business with us. After leaving, I told both Alex and Peter that I didn't trust the guy and that hopefully the next person we met would be more professional. They agreed with me, thinking that perhaps the guy had been smoking something stronger than tobacco.

The next meeting was with a promoter who produced music concerts and plays. We met him at an Indian restaurant he owned. In an embarrassing moment for me, when we got out of the car it was so hot that I put my briefcase down to wipe my brow, and when I bent over to pick it back up I heard rrrriiiipppp. In the first of my wrestling-related wardrobe malfunctions, my pants tore along the inseam, from one knee to the other, across the crotch. When I told Alex and Peter what had happened, they started laughing. When I asked them to take me back to the hotel to change, they told me we didn't have time. So I took off my jacket, wrapped it around my waist and went to the meeting as I was. Luckily the person understood and was not offended.

The second promoter was all business. He asked about so many nuances that I knew he was a true promoter. I had a good feeling about him.

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

With my ex-wife Sharon

Thinking that the Vietnam tour would be scheduled for late April, we looked at doing the UAE tour in either March or May, depending on what dates were available in Israel — we wanted to coordinate the two tours.

While Alex stayed behind in Dubai, Peter and I were off to Tel Aviv. Leaving Dubai was as strange as arriving; I noticed there were no metal detectors at the airport when boarding. When I asked the security person about it, he responded, in very broken English, "We do not have to worry about hijackers or terrorists."

Because we were delayed leaving Dubai, Peter and I missed our plane in London, and to get to Tel Aviv that night we had to fly first class through Germany. Security was as tight in Frankfurt as it was lax in Dubai. It reminded me of the military presence I had seen the year before in Israel. Police carried submachine guns, and the security checkpoint was the most thorough I had ever seen. In addition to checking everything in your bag, from toiletries to dirty underwear, they separated the passengers by sex and had a security officer pat them down. They also made anyone with any type of electronic device turn it on to show it was in working order.

With the exception of seeing some of the sites I had missed the first time, the three-day trip to Israel was uneventful. Moshe took us to the sports arena in Tel Aviv, which I had already been to, showed us the facility in Jerusalem and gave us a breakdown of how much everything would cost. He was willing to work in partnership, but because he had taken a beating on wrestling the year before, he would not buy the shows; we would have to put up all the money, which Alex was willing to do. Moshe told us that May would be better than March, and we started looking at potential dates.

On my return that December I had to go through my divorce.

Sharon and I went to court, we told the judge we had irreconcilable differences, the judge pounded his gavel and just like that our marriage was dissolved. Afterward we went to Denny's to have a cup of coffee. She knew I still loved her, and I knew she loved me too, but I also knew she couldn't live with me. After 11

years, we decided to stay friends.

It really didn't hit me that the divorce was final until I found out that Sharon was going to New York for New Year's with a man she had met after we separated. I was hurt and felt alone, so I decided to do something about it. For New Year's I would go to the one place where I could forget everything about being married — Las Vegas.

I remember peering out the window of the plane at the lights of Sin City and wondering what was in store for me; 1994 had been full of experiences, both good and bad. The most important thing I learned is the truth of that old axiom "as one door closes another one opens."

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.
— Philip K. Dick (1928–1982)

ELEVEN

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE DOWNRIGHT SCARY

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Peter Patel and Alex Dubash were my partners, and the registered owners of a Miami-based company called Cohiet

There are two ways to slide easily through life; to believe everything or to doubt everything. Both ways save us from thinking.
— Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950)

For me the start of a new year signaled a new beginning, a fresh start for my life and the chance to make the mark in the wrestling business that I longed for.

I don't know if my change of attitude occurred at midnight when I grabbed and kissed that Chinese cocktail waitress at Bally's, but even though I still had emotional scars from the divorce, I no longer let it keep me down. As far as business

was concerned, it couldn't have looked better.

Aside from scheduling tours to Vietnam, Israel and the United Arab Emirates in the coming months, we added Egypt to the list. I was contacted by a promoter named Ebrahim Al Fardan of the Al Fardan Group who wanted to do shows in Cairo and Alexandria. I also started planning an NWA PPV that Alex was willing to bankroll. At a hefty price tag of $3.3 million, I knew he was serious about being a major player in the U.S. wrestling scene. I finally had a steady paycheck again, I was doing something I loved, and my Indian partners had promised to lend me $10,000 by mid-January to help me get completely out of debt.

Between working for them under the NWA Florida banner, the commission money from Hiro that was starting to come in and helping Tod when I could — even though my monthly fee for trying to syndicate ECW had come to an end when I joined the NWA, I still had commission money due thanks to the deal I had cut with Powersports Video — everything was looking quite promising.

But things change quickly in this business.

At the end of January I was scheduled to attend the annual NATPE convention in Las Vegas for Hiro. The week before I was supposed to get the $10,000 from Alex, but he suddenly became unavailable. I had a hard time reaching Peter too, but when I finally did he told me Alex was tied up with some personal things and that he would make sure I got the loan when I got back from Vegas. I really didn't think anything of it as Peter had never lied to me before and as a company we had already spent much more than that traveling around the world to set up the tours for later in the year.

Around this time Tod paid a visit to South Florida to take care of some personal business, and while he was in town we socialized. Not the kind of "socializing" he did with Kevin Sullivan the first day I met him, but going out to dinner and visiting a strip club or two. I also tried getting Phi Delta Slam hired by Tod as I thought they would work well in ECW, making good opponents for Public Enemy — "Flyboy" Rocco Rock (Ted Petty) and Johnny Grunge (Mike Durham). At the time Phi Delta Slam was comprised of Brother Bluto (Bruno Sassi) and Brother Otter (Danny Ackerman), and Big Till (James Tilquist) was considered the team's alternate. Unfortunately Tod didn't think their interview skills were polished enough to make it in ECW, and while they eventually had several matches there, he passed.

I went to Vegas as planned, and I was feeling so confident that even my personal life took an unusual turn. While at NATPE — my second trip to Vegas in a month — I noticed a good-looking woman who seemed a bit lost. After seeing the damsel in distress I offered to help her back to her booth, and once there I was bold enough to ask her to go to dinner with me. The dinner sparked a short but nice

60-day romance that abruptly ended when she went back to her husband, from who she was separated, after finding out she was pregnant with his baby. But the relationship was just the thing my bruised ego needed at the time.

A couple of other things happened at NATPE. First I learned WCW would be doing a show while I was in town, so I arranged a morning meeting with Gordon Solie, who was still working for them. At breakfast Gordon confessed he was growing tired of WCW's creative direction and was ready to retire. Part of why he was upset was Eric Bischoff's nickel-and-diming him on travel, while others flew first class.

Knowing I was involved with Hiro, Gordon broached the prospect of coming on board. I knew there was still a little heat between Gordon and Hiro, but Gordon seemed willing to forget that to do voiceovers in Tampa once every six or seven weeks and be semi-retired. I loved the idea of bringing in Gordon, but that would mean that Craig Minervini (Craig DeGeorge) would have to be let go, and while he wasn't a play-by-play man of Gordon's caliber, he was doing a very good job for us. I told Gordon I would talk to Hiro.

Secondly, Bud Schaffer, who got us the Eurosport deal, said he had met with a company that used to represent the WWF for merchandising and licensing and was now interested in representing WSW. Leisure Concepts Incorporated (LCI) and its chief executive officer, Alfred R. Khan, had an impeccable reputation in the licensing and merchandising industry and at the time were representing such brands as Nintendo, the latest James Bond film and a property it helped develop, WMAC (World Martial Arts Council) Masters.

Today LCI is known as 4Kids Entertainment. It specializes in the acquisition, production and licensing of children's entertainment around the world. The company is most well known for its range of television licenses, and they also run program blocks on the CW and FOX stations.

Kahn, whose company had represented Titan Sports before the McMahons decided to bring their merchandising and licensing in-house, told me he had some great ideas for WSW, including a re-branding concept that would set us apart from the rest of the wrestling organizations. He liked that we were presenting WSW as more competition than cartoon but pointed out there was a way to hybridize the two presentations. Having received power of attorney from Hiro to make whatever deals were necessary to advance his business, I told Kahn we had a deal in principle and would finalize it with Hiro's signature when we visited him in New York the following month for the annual American International Toy Fair.

Confident that we were on the right track, I decided to be a bit brazen and go over to the WWF booth to say hello to Linda McMahon. I hadn't seen Linda since

that day she flew me to Connecticut for a job interview, and I didn't see her when I first approached the booth. I did see Vince, however, and being certain he wouldn't recognize me from more than 10 years earlier, I handed him my NWA business card; I didn't want to hand him my WSW card as I didn't want him to know I was one of the people responsible for them being booted from Eurosport.

But Vince was more tuned in to his competition than I thought.

While shaking my hand he looked at my card. Seeing my name and realizing who I was, he said, "Oh, Howard, yes of course. Hello. I believe there is a little issue we need to straighten out with you. Let me get Linda and she can talk to you about it."

I don't know if Vince was trying to avoid a confrontation with me in front of people, but his whole demeanor changed as he walked to get his wife. I didn't go there to start a scene. I wanted to say hello to Linda and maybe put my chest out and show her that, despite not being hired by her, I had made my own little mark in the business.

When Linda came back a couple of minutes later she was as charming with me as she had been the day she interviewed me in her Greenwich office, except now I posed something of a threat to her.

"Hello, Howard," she said, extending her hand.

"Mrs. McMahon . . . it's so nice to see you again."

"Don't be so formal," she said. (I felt both she and her husband deserved to be respected, and I was not about to call them Vince or Linda unless they said it was okay.)

"So, it seems you've been busy since we last saw each other," she said, acknowledging my progress in the business. "But we have a little problem."

"What's that?"

"Well, you're calling your show World Superstars of Wrestling, and as you know in Europe and elsewhere we have a show called WWF Superstars. We would prefer to straighten this out without getting legal involved."

"I completely understand your position," I said, trying not to appear shaken by her threats. "But, as you know, our company name is World Superstars of Wrestling, Incorporated, and so we have every legal right to call our show WSW."

She did not seem phased as I was saying all of this very matter-of-factly. "However," I continued, "I just came from a meeting, and it was recommended to us by our new licensing and merchandising partner that we should re-brand our show to avoid any confusion between WSW and WCW. So, effective with our next postproduction session, we'll be changing our name."

Even though Hiro and I really never thought there would or could be any

confusion between WWF and WSW, we were concerned with confusion with WCW. Linda seemed happy with my promise and wished me luck. I reciprocated the gesture and went on my way.

WSW was on the path to success and visions of an NWA PPV were dancing in my head, but when I got home from Las Vegas, everything with Alex and Peter spiraled out of control. When Craig, Dan and I couldn't reach either of them by phone, I telephoned one of Alex's other business partners. Within an hour of leaving a message I heard from Alex's wife, Hilda.

On January 18th, the week before I went to Las Vegas, for the first time in the history of the United States, federal agents in Miami used a tough environmental protection law to jail what they called a new breed of smugglers — traffickers peddling a cheap fix to overheated motorists. Citing violations of the United States Clean Air Act, the U.S. Customs Service and Environmental Protection Agency announced a record seizure of an unusual contraband: 126 tons of dichlorodifluoromethane (R-12), a tightly regulated gas refrigerant and aerosol spray propellant used to recharge air conditioners in older cars. It is a chlorofluorocarbon halomethane, commonly known as CFC, and was usually sold under the brand name Freon-12, until its manufacture was banned in the U.S., and many other countries, due to concerns about damage to the ozone layer.

Adi Dara Dubash (Alex) and Homi N. Patel (Peter) were the registered owners of a Miami-based company called Cohiet. Federal agents caught them in a sting called Operation Cool Breeze as they supposedly tried to divert seven cargo containers of the CFCs from India to Mexico by way of Great Britain to be shipped into the New York/New Jersey area in bonded status. They were further charged with arranging for five of the seven containers to be forwarded to Miami, purportedly for reshipment out of the United States.

My partners were the first people in the history of the U.S. to be arrested for trying to sell refrigerator coolant. It's not like we were talking about Pablo Escobar here. It was basically two schmucks who thought they could get away with making a quick buck by selling a product that was in high demand.

Was what they supposedly did illegal? Yes. Did they deserve to be punished? Yes.

But why did it have to happen to *my* partners?

Alex's wife assured me this was only a minor setback and wouldn't change the plans we had, but I knew different. Because the government wasn't exactly sure where Alex got his money, they froze all his personal assets, including his bank accounts. At one point I even tried to help with posting a bond for him, but federal prosecutors felt Alex, a U.S. citizen born in India, posed a flight risk, so they kept him incarcerated. Peter, meanwhile, was able to make bond on his own, and

from my conversations with him, I was confident he had just been carrying out Alex's instructions, as he didn't have that kind of money himself. Peter was at least honest when he said considering everything that was happening, our wrestling venture was over.

I felt bad for Alex and Peter, but I was screwed. Not only was I relying on that weekly paycheck, but I was counting on the loan to get my financial house in order.

Who was I going to turn to for help? To paraphrase the lyrics of a song, then a *Hiro* came along.

During a conversation with Hiro Matsuda, I told him what had happened with my Indian partners. He did something that I didn't expect him to do and hadn't asked him to do.

"Starting tomorrow," he said. "You will go on salary instead of commission and come to work for me full time."

I was stunned. He continued: "I will also lend you the $10,000 you need. I'll pay you enough each month so you don't have to worry about making your bills, and I will deduct money from your salary until you pay me back in full."

Hiro absolutely floored me. I knew we had bonded quite a bit in France and he was happy with the prognosis for business with LCI, but this was beyond the scope of him being my employer. He was an honest to goodness friend and in time would become one of my best friends. As he would explain to me later, he felt the timing was right and since the company could now afford it with the sales we were making, he needed me to have all my efforts on WSW and not be distracted elsewhere.

Overnight it changed the dynamics of my workweek. Instead of working a nine-to-five Monday-through-Friday schedule, I worked to coincide with business in Europe and Asia. I closed the office I had opened with Peter and Alex and moved the computer and fax machine to my apartment. But instead of just dropping everything from an NWA Florida perspective, since the membership was in my name, I wanted to see if I could at least salvage the overseas tours and maybe even the PPV.

Staying in touch with some of the people I had worked with before, I contacted Charles Scheuerman, who had been involved with the power struggle and stock deal at MFG. Charles said he knew of only one person who could help me, a Miami CPA named Stuart Cooper. Stuart specialized in private funding for all sorts of ventures, including taking companies public. While I didn't need to take a company public, I did need substantial funding for the PPV and overseas projects, and I explained the entire situation to Cooper. Stuart said he knew someone who might be interested in the project, a fellow CPA who shared his Miami Shores office and promoted bodybuilding events, John Carl Mese.

In the meantime I got a call from Dennis Coralluzzo telling me that NWA world champion Chris Candido had been offered a WWF contract and we needed to fill his spot within the next 30 days. Dennis suggested Dan "The Beast" Severn.

"The UFC fighter?" I asked.

Dennis explained that Dan had been trained to wrestle pro style by Al Snow — one of the guys I had penciled in to go on the Vietnam tour — and somehow our mutual friend Phyllis Lee was involved with him as well. When Dennis said it would mean having the NWA world heavyweight champion on UFC PPVs and going to the ring wearing the NWA belt, I told him he had my vote on the title switch.

Dennis was the most active promoter in the NWA — and besides me the only NWA promoter in the U.S. at the time — and considering I wasn't sure if I would even promote another NWA show, I felt Dennis should call all the shots. If he thought Dan could help him draw for his shows in New Jersey, then I felt that's who should wear the strap.

By the beginning of February I had my first meeting with John Carl Mese. John had not only been a hell of bodybuilder in his day, being dubbed by his peers the "Strawberry Samson" for his then flowing red hair and muscular physique, but he was a prominent accountant. He'd been president of Mese & Associates in Miami Shores since 1970 and occasionally taught accounting theory at two local universities. He also owned a local facility called Sun Gym, which was where professional bodybuilders trained when they came to Miami to compete. Mese was also promoting his own bodybuilding competitions in South Florida.

Initially we met at his Miami Lakes office. My first impression of John was that he seemed like such a nice, sincere guy, and we hit it off. He told me that in his younger days he had thought about getting into professional wrestling, but the business was looked down on by those in the bodybuilding industry, and he felt pressure not to pursue that career path. But he admitted to being a fan of the squared circle and watching wrestling on television throughout the years.

After the small talk was over, I laid out all the scenarios for him and why I was seeking financing. I covered everything from the PPV to the foreign tours, and he told me he thought he might be able to raise the money, but it would take a few weeks. The timing was fine since Hiro and I had to go to New York to meet with Al Kahn. By the time I got back from the toy fair, he would most likely have an answer for me regarding what he could and couldn't do.

My focus was then on the Big Apple. I had a vague idea of what the toy fair was all about, having been to broadcasting trade shows like MIPCOM and NATPE where the primary goal was to license TV programs to broadcast networks and distributors. The toy fair had a similar goal, but, instead of peddling TV shows to networks,

toy manufacturers launched their new products to prospective buyers. In 1995 more than 20,000 manufacturers from across the U.S. and more than 80 foreign countries attended the fair.

Hiro and I got to see LCI in action and caught a glimpse of the licensing and merchandising power players they were. At the time LCI was one of the largest independent licensing agencies in the world and the only one with both an in-house toy design and development group and the contacts necessary for the successful implementation of a master toy license, which would be essential if we were going to crack the U.S. market. With offices in New York and London, the combination of LCI's database of manufacturers and retailers plus their knowledge of distributors and television networks around the world would be a tremendous boost for us.

Al Kahn pulled out the stops for our meeting, assembling the heads of each division at LCI. Hiro and I were in the presence of a merchandising and licensing dream team and we knew it.

LCI wanted to do for us what they had done for the WWF, which had helped catapult Vince and company to the forefront of the wrestling industry. When we asked Al what kind of income he could generate for us, he produced a spreadsheet that showed what they had grossed for Titan Sports over a six-year period. The figure exceeded $100 million.

Hiro looked at the figure and asked Al, "Is that number correct, or a typo?"

When Al said, "That's a real number," Hiro grinned from ear to ear. Al added, "I thought you would like that."

Kahn had become one of the most influential forces shaping a dramatically expanding global licensing industry. At the time he had become a leader in that industry's continuing growth toward multifaceted entertainment. An imposing figure with a quick wit and intense focus, Al was a well-liked, affable yet no-nonsense guy who earned his business stripes at Coleco Industries, where he had acquired the Cabbage Patch license and was the marketing mastermind behind the line's historic success.

He and his team had a simple plan for us. Keep our corporate identity as is but change our wrestling brand to be more mainstream and adaptive to other applications. They wanted something that didn't necessarily scream wrestling. Once accomplished, they would go to Bandai, the toy company behind the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and master toy licensee for WMAC Masters. Apparently Bandai, who knew LCI had once represented the WWF, had inquired if they were also representing a wrestling company.

The way Al explained it to us, Bandai would put up the money to be the master toy licensee — which in the case of WMAC Masters was $7 million — and that

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The brochure that introduced Ring Warriors to international broadcasters

money would be used for original television production through 4Kids Productions, a wholly owned subsidiary of LCI, and to buy air time on TV stations in the U.S. through the Media Summit Group, Inc., another wholly owned subsidiary of LCI. Based on that formula, WMAC Masters was able to penetrate more than 80 percent of the U.S. domestic market, which enabled them to get a list of impressive corporate sponsors. By providing media planning, buying, marketing services and television syndication, Media Summit Group would be able to accomplish this for us as well.

Al and his team felt that we wouldn't be able to clear 80 percent of the U.S. until September '96, more than year and a half away, but felt strongly we could launch with 50 to 60 percent by next April. They believed that would give them the time they needed to put everything in place. We would continue to push the show internationally on our own.

We still needed a name and several were bandied about the conference room until I came up with the name "Ring Warriors." Hiro liked it right away because it reminded him of the title of a book he had just finished reading, *The Heart of the Warrior* by Catharina Blomberg. Al and his staff liked it too; they thought it was short and to the point and would work well from a marketing perspective. LCI's art department would immediately go to work creating a logo for our brand while its legal department would begin the trademark process.

There was one final issue that needed to be addressed with LCI, and if Al and his team were okay with it, Hiro's signature on a contract would seal the deal.

Before going to New York I had cautiously broached the subject of having

Gordon Solie replace Craig DeGeorge on our show as the play-by-play man. As I suspected, there were still ill feelings over Gordon's dismissal and not all of them were on Gordon's part. But understanding that you didn't necessarily have to like someone to do business with them, Hiro said that he would consider bringing Gordon in only if LCI thought he could fit in with whatever marketing plan they had in mind.

When I brought Gordon's name up, at first Al thought Gordon was too old for what we needed and would not appeal to the younger demographic we were going to go after. However, Susan Eisner, the director of marketing, said that if we were trying to present a more realistic portrayal of wrestling than the WWF or WCW, then Gordon would be the perfect fit since he always called wrestling as if it were real. As she put it, we needed someone who could call the play-by-play to match the style we were showing in the ring, and she believed Gordon would be able to do that.

Because bringing Gordon on board was my idea, I had the job of not only telling Gordon the good news but telling Craig the bad news. Hiro explicitly wanted Craig to know this had nothing to do with the job he had done for us but was a shift in direction. He also wanted me to tell Craig that when we started our own production — which, based on the plan we had with LCI, would be soon — we would be calling on him to rejoin us. Hiro did not want to sever ties with Craig completely because he thought, and I agreed, that Craig would be great for doing interview segments and profile pieces on the wrestlers. When I called Craig to let him know what was going on, he was a little pissed and said he didn't want to be handed a line about being called back at some point. He said he understood the decision to go with Gordon because he was who he was, but he didn't like the notion of being strung along if we had no intention of ever using him again. I assured him that our plan was to do our own productions within the next year and at that point we would need additional announcers and he was at the top of the list. We ultimately parted on good terms.

Although we were all set for Gordon to become the voice of Ring Warriors, we didn't need him to start until late April since we had so many shows already in the can, and they would take us through the end of May. So Hiro, Gordon and I agreed that we would keep the news about Gordon as quiet as possible for as long as we could so he could continue to be paid by WCW right up to the time he planned to give his two weeks' notice in mid-May.

While things were progressing nicely with WSW, which would now be referred to as Ring Warriors, I seemed to be caught between the politics of the NWA and making money with ECW. In a perfect world, I would have been able to continue working with both of them, but I knew it wasn't a perfect world. Before long it was

Paul Heyman who would dictate which side of the promotional fence my loyalty would fall.

While Chris Candido was putting Dan Severn over for the NWA world heavyweight championship in Erlanger, Kentucky, on one of Jim Cornette's Smoky Mountain Wrestling shows in late February, I was trying to collect commission money from ECW on a licensing deal I'd cut for them. Initially Tod paid me a commission for the first set of 13 tapes licensed to Sumitomo Corporation in Japan, but I never got paid for the 20 episodes that were licensed by Powersports Video. I didn't even know that the deal had gone through until William McAbian, the owner of Powersports, called me to see if he could license 40 more hours; Tod had given me the impression that the deal had never materialized. When I called him to complain and ask for my commission, about $3,000, he told me that Paul had made the licensing deal and put the agreement through his new company, HHG Corporation.

I felt the two of them were playing a game of good-cop, bad-cop, and I now had to track down Paul, and he was ducking my calls. I got so frustrated that during a telephone conversation with Nancy Sullivan one morning, I filled her in on the story, explaining that it affected her too because some of the money due to me was supposed to go to Kevin. When Nancy asked why I didn't go after Paul legally, I confessed that it would probably cost me more money to get a New York attorney than I was owed. The best I could hope to do was get Paul on the phone and threaten to sue, hoping he would own up and pay. When I finally got to Paul — on that very afternoon — and confronted him, he started spin doctoring in an attempt to prove he didn't owe me anything.

Paul had a unique view of the truth. Dennis Coralluzzo use to say Paul Heyman would rather climb a tree and tell a lie than stand on the ground and tell the truth. But perhaps newsletter writer Wade Keller of the *Pro Wrestling Torch* put it best when in the mid-'90s he wrote: "Paul Heyman doesn't spin like a normal person, or even a normal wrestler. Spinning for Heyman is an art form, a challenge for him to prove that he is smarter than the person to who he is spinning. Creative half-truths, variations of the truth, irrelevant truths, the truth, and lies are all mixed until Heyman has his subject so dazed that he or she just gives in to the avalanche of verbiage or, in some cases, refuses to talk to Heyman anymore."

That described my interaction with Paul to a tee. If he couldn't dazzle me with his brilliance he'd baffle me with his bullshit. I finally got pissed enough that I threatened him with a lawsuit. But like the master he was, he threw my very own words right back in my face.

"Come on Howard," he said, "You know you aren't going to try to sue me. It's

going to cost you more to get a lawyer in New York than what you think I owe you."

He had obviously gotten those words directly from Nancy, and that made me nuts. I couldn't fathom why she would betray me. Part of that money was intended for her husband. Worse, she was a friend — or at least I thought she was. I'd socialized with Nancy and Kevin many times while at Kim and Wylie's house, both in the Keys and in South Florida. I'll never forget sitting with them all, talking about the business and watching Nancy roll a joint, offering me a toke every so often. Was she really that worried about her job that she had to stooge out a friend?

Paul had me over a barrel, and if I hadn't been making good money at that point thanks to Hiro I probably would have tried pursuing the issue. To this day I believe I was a bit of a pawn in some bizarre chess game between ECW and the NWA. Dennis felt as though he was taking something away from them by bringing me into the NWA just as Paul and Tod were swerving him over the title. Paul's attitude toward me changed, and I believe that if I had never connected with Dennis I would never have found myself battling Paul over my commission. I think Paul took my decision to join the NWA personally and considered it betrayal. To me it was all business, but I suppose I had to give some credence to what Kevin had mentioned earlier about not sticking with "my own kind."

Although Paul and I would eventually cut a deal years later, during ECW's last days and the NWA's resurgence, the dispute over my commission killed any future business I might do with Extreme Championship Wrestling.

As I was looking toward brighter and better things, I caught back up with John Carl Mese at the beginning of March, this time at his Miami Shores office. While John told me he couldn't come up with the money for the PPV I wanted to put together and didn't have the type of money himself to finance the international tours, he said he knew someone who would. John told me this person named "Danny" was expecting some money in the next 60 days, which meant we would have to push the tours back, but when the money came in he would put $40,000 or $50,000 up to get the ball rolling.

John was pretty specific as to why this investor thought the deal was attractive. There was the return factor — for the first two tours we were looking at netting $1 million to $1.5 million based on a $250,000 investment — and this Danny person "really liked the project because it had to do with an overseas aspect."

A red flag should have gone up right away, considering what I had just gone through with Alex and Peter, but Mese was so respected in South Florida I assumed his client was on the up and up.

While we were waiting for Danny's money to come in, John and I started

talking about setting up a card locally with the people I had in mind for the PPV. He thought it would be a good way to prove to the investor that I could deliver, and he was willing to put up $25,000 to $30,000 of his own money for the ultimate dog-and-pony show.

Since he personally wouldn't be able to give me the money until after his June bodybuilding event, we picked Friday, August 18th, because we needed six solid weeks to promote the event, which we would call a Hot August Fight.

I started lining up talent, and before I knew it the middle of April was upon us and with it came Gordon's foray into the world of Ring Warriors. Gordon was also still working for WCW, so we had to keep his participation very low-key, and Gordon's longtime associate and our color analyst John Sutton (a.k.a. Sir Oliver Humperdink) was sworn to secrecy. Hump had worked well with Craig DeGeorge, and they had gotten to know each other's nuances. Even though the traditional roles of the team were that DeGeorge was the play-by-play man and Hump did color, because of Sir Oliver's expertise, they frequently switched roles to fill in the gaps. Gordon didn't think that would be necessary, but the Dean was not prepared for what he was about to experience.

Gordon was accustomed to calling a match move for move, and while that might be perfect for calling a bout between Harley Race and Jack Brisco, when it's Jushin Thunder Liger (Keiichi Yamada) and the Black Tiger (Eddie Guerrero) it doesn't quite work. As Gordon and Humperdink took their positions in the sound booth, they went over the matches for the first of the seven episodes they would do together and talked about the angles that would cover the seven weeks of television. When Gordon asked Hump if there was anything in particular he should be aware of regarding the pacing of the shows, Hump said something to the effect of, "It can get pretty crazy at times, so just give me the high sign when you want me to jump in. Otherwise I'll stick to getting angles across and enhance what you're calling."

These two guys had known each other for the better part of 25 years, had done hundreds of interviews together and when Humperdink said that, Gordon shot him a look.

As the video for the first match started, the two announcers treaded lightly. As the match went on they got into their traditional roles — Gordon doing the play-by-play and Hump handling the color. Gordon Solie's voice gave the show the erudite professionalism it had been missing. But then Yamada and Guerrero did a series of moves that looked as if someone had pressed the fast forward button on the VCR, exchanging wrestling holds at breakneck speed. Gordon tried to keep up, and when he started to stumble, Hump jumped right in, "Keep going Gordon! Keep going!" which he tried to do.

When the two wrestlers finished their exchange and were in opposite corners of the ring long enough to catch their breath and measure each other up, it gave Gordon a chance to do the same, at which time he blurted out a resounding, "Man!"

Even though his exclamation was meant for himself, as though he couldn't believe he couldn't keep up, it gave a real punch to the show. When our soundman, Tim Spero, paused the tape so Gordon could get back on track, Gordon and Hump started laughing. The Dean then turned to Sir Oliver and in a very serious tone said, "Next time I think I'll give you a high sign, and then you can jump right in."

As the two cronies went back to work, picking it up from the middle of the match, they really began gelling. By the time they were halfway through the first show it sounded as though they had been working together like that for years. At one point, when Hiro saw how comfortable they were together and how different the show sounded — in a good way — he turned to me and simply said, "You did good kid." I knew that meant he was happy and, next to putting out a quality show, that was the most important thing.

Gordon was excited about Ring Warriors, and he found a new energy he hadn't felt in years. You could not only see it on his face, but you could hear it in the tone of his voice. After that first session he went to Hiro and thanked him for giving him another opportunity, to which Hiro simply said, "You're the best." Gordon was.

Any remnants of heat that might have been left between the two were completely gone. Gordon had just one thing left to do: give his notice to WCW.

Before he could tender his resignation, Gordon found out he was going to be honored in the 1995 WCW Hall of Fame ceremony that would take place in late May. While he had been involved in the selection of inductees the previous two years, they didn't consult him for the class of '95. Shortly after his first Ring Warriors voice-over session, Eric Bischoff caught wind that Solie was going to leave WCW. Although we kept the information fairly low-key, some of the press releases we sent to out to the TV stations that were airing our show made their way back to the WCW brass. When Bischoff confronted Gordon at one of their TV tapings, Gordon admitted he wanted to semi-retire and that doing voice-overs 30 minutes from his house once every seven weeks was appealing. At that point he gave them notice that he would be leaving, effective June 1st. Earlier in the year Gordon had caught heat from Bischoff, Hulk Hogan and others for trying to derail Angelo Poffo's induction into the WCW Hall of Fame. While Poffo's son "Macho Man" Randy Savage pushed for the laurels, Gordon opposed the choice, believing wrestlers — or in this case, the family of wrestlers — should not lobby for a spot. Gordon also cited Poffo's lack of time in WCW as reason to exclude him.

Around this time, Homi N. "Peter" Patel was the first to ever be found guilty of violating the federal Clean Air Act. He pled guilty to four counts, carrying a maximum five-year prison sentence and a $250,000 fine. Scheduled to be sentenced July 25th, Peter hoped to reduce his punishment by entering a plea agreement. He would help federal prosecutors in their case against Alex, his codefendant, friend and former business partner.

Also around that time Hiro told me that Antonio Inoki would be coming to Tampa and that he too would be inducted into WCW's hall of fame. Hiro wanted to arrange a meeting so I could help him explain our plans to begin producing television shows for the U.S., how LCI fit into the picture and what we would need going forward from New Japan — after all, we were still using their footage.

Two and a half weeks later I dragged Craig Cohen to Tampa so I wouldn't have to make the drive alone. It was the usual road trip of strip clubs and Waffle House breakfasts, except Craig would keep himself busy while Hiro and I met with Inoki-san.

I was still getting ready when Hiro showed up at the hotel. I thought he was about an hour early, but when he corrected me on the time for the meeting, I moved into high gear . . . except I had a little problem. I had my suit jacket, but not the pants. Howard's wardrobe malfunction number two: mashed-potato brain had left half of his suit at home in Fort Lauderdale.

It wouldn't have been as bad if I had a pair of jeans with me, but the only thing I brought aside from the suit — okay, half of the suit — was a couple of pair of shorts. As I got dressed I told Hiro we'd have to stop so I could get a pair of dress pants. When he said we wouldn't have time, Craig asked if I wanted to borrow a pair of his pants.

At the time I stood about five foot nine and a half and weighed about 230 or 240 pounds, while Craig was about six feet tall and weighed somewhere between 270 and 280 pounds. The color worked, but I was swimming in Craig's pants, and the only way I could keep them from falling down was to hold them up with one hand because there were no belt loops.

When I complained that I couldn't go to a meeting dressed like that, Hiro insisted there was no time to stop. So off I went to meet Inoki — Japanese wrestling legend and standing senator in the House of Councillors of the National Diet of Japan — in what could only be described as clown pants.

When we arrived at the Westshore Marriot, Hiro wanted me to wait in the car for 15 minutes before joining him in Inoki's room. Our meeting was supposed to be discreet, and since the entire WCW contingency was staying at the same hotel, Hiro didn't want the two of us to be seen together because he didn't want anyone to think that we were there on business.

When the time came, I held on to the waist of my pants and scurried from the parking lot, through the lobby and to the elevator bank unseen, although I did hear the distinct sound of Kevin Sullivan's voice.

After knocking at Inoki's suite, Hiro opened the door and led me inside, where he quickly introduced me to the Japanese idol. As self-conscious as I had been in Dubai with ripped pants and half of my backside sticking out, this was even more embarrassing.

Inoki is one of those larger-than-life individuals whose name and stature rise above the business. He'd appeared in movies (*Bad News Bears Go to Japan*), faced an American icon (Muhammad Ali) and rubbed elbows with the famous and infamous (Sadam Hussein and Fidel Castro, among others). Next to baseball legend Sadaharu Oh, Antonio Inoki was probably Japan's most recognized sports celebrity.

Once inside I was faced with another little predicament. Even though we were in Tampa, I intended to bow to Mr. Inoki according to the Japanese protocol. But as I had learned in my travels with Hiro, proper etiquette is to keep both hands at your sides when bowing. If I did that, my pants would fall to the floor. So I held my pants with one hand and bowed as best as I could. I did my best to express my honor at meeting him, and when I lifted my torso back up Inoki-san extended his hand, appreciating my gesture.

Almost immediately I could sense Inoki was measuring me up, and when he started conversing with his longtime associate in Japanese, I got the distinct feeling he was talking about my attire. I had traveled with and been around Hiro enough to sense what was going on when he spoke Japanese, and even though my boss assured me Inoki understood what had transpired, I could not help feeling like a real *shlump* in front of the man.

We eventually got down to business, and after about an hour of discussing every nuance of our plan for Ring Warriors, we wrapped up the meeting, said our goodbyes and left Inoki's hotel room. At first I found it a little odd that we were not leaving the hotel under the same veil of discreetness that we had arrived in. As we were walking back to the elevator, Hiro shook his head and let out a short sigh. I could tell he was disappointed, and I thought he was upset at me.

"Sorry about the pants," I began.

He cut me off. "You're not the problem," Hiro said abruptly. "New Japan is the problem."

I was already close enough to Hiro to know when to press for answers and when to keep silent. This was one of the times when not to ask any questions.

Part of the reason we were there was to get Inoki on board with our U.S. plans, so when the time came for Ring Warriors to make its television debut in the States

we would already have a solid relationship with NJPW. Because we had already established the Ring Warrior brand in Europe using NJPW footage, we wanted to do a slow transition to U.S. talent, and to do so, we needed NJPW to forsake their relationship with WCW and work exclusively with us. Inoki refused to commit and took a wait and see attitude. He also lowered the boom: we could no longer air footage of talent who were also working for WCW. That decision would seriously limit us going forward. Because of that lack of commitment, Hiro no longer cared if Eric Bischoff or anyone else from WCW knew we were meeting Inoki at the hotel.

Hiro had an interesting relationship with Inoki, and while he relied heavily on him for some things, there were times when he wished he could cut him out. In time I would come to understand why Hiro even frequently despised his longtime colleague, witnessing some of Inoki's disrespect firsthand.

On Saturday, June 3rd, exactly 13 days after the meeting with Inoki, I was supposed to have a follow-up meeting with John Carl Mese at the James L. Knight Center in downtown Miami, where the National Physique Committee's Florida Men's State Championship competition was scheduled to take place that night. When I got there, however, Mese was unavailable. I was told by one of the workers that he was tied up and would have to talk to me during the week. Having promoted shows myself, I could understand there might be issues that needed his attention, and I thought nothing of it. I stayed and watched the show to see how an event of this type ran, and, though bored out of my mind, I thought it was well organized. The only thing that struck me as odd was the large number of police in attendance, but I figured it was because of the number of contestants.

By mid-week I reconnected with Mese at his Miami Shores office, and he apologized for not being available to see me at the show, citing unforeseen circumstances. He reiterated his commitment to back a Hot August Fight, but he told me that it would be a week or two before he'd have the money and that "Danny" would be financing it because he had not done as well as he'd hoped at his bodybuilding event. In late May, prior to his bodybuilding event, Mese had said that in order for him to put in the money he had to be a signer on my bank account, so I had him sign a resolution, took a copy of his driver's license to the bank and had him sign a bank signature card to put him on my account. I also gave him a deposit slip so, when he had the money, he could deposit it directly into my account. This still gave us plenty of time to promote the event, so I began booking the talent for what would be the biggest NWA event in years.

With a 4,000-seat arena to fill — Mese was able to book the Knight Center for us at a great rate because of his long-standing relationship with the building — we needed something that would turn heads and draw a lot of attention to the show.

Since the only non-WWF or non-WCW event to ever draw anything of substance there was when Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi did a near sellout by booking a Shootfighting versus PWFG show in March 1992, I decided to try to recreate that interest by booking a Shootfighting versus NWA main event.

Bart Vale, who not only coined but trademarked the phrase Shootfighting, was a local wrestler who I had met several years earlier through Larry Simon (the Great Malenko). Vale was not much of a name on the pro wrestling circuit in the U.S., but he had established a name for himself in Japan and was more well-known stateside for his martial arts. Vale was even featured in the December 1993 issue of *Sports Illustrated* in an article titled "Shootfightin' Man." Vale was the ISFA (International Shootfighting Association) heavyweight champion and in Miami, thanks to his Tiger & Dragon Kenpo Karate martial arts academy, had a huge student following. It was those acolytes who had bought the tickets to see him and Yoshiaki Fujiwara get it on in '92.

Striking a deal with Vale in which he would get a percentage of every ticket sold, I was able to work out the details of a match between him and Dan Severn for an ISFA versus NWA title versus title match. Going with the old NWA standard of best two-out-of-three falls, each opponent would shine in their specific discipline. I also got them to agree that each fall would have different rules and outcomes. The first fall would go to local-favorite Vale under the rules of karate. Even though Severn was proficient in karate himself, he knew that in order to make the match work he had to let the babyface take the first fall. The second fall would go to Severn, winner of UFC 5, under the rules of Shootfighting, which were very similar to those of Ultimate Fighting. Severn would thus get the upper hand by beating Vale at his own game. The third fall would be a draw under the rules of pro wrestling — we weren't sure if we should go time limit, ref stoppage or double count out, but, however it would end, it would end in a draw with both opponents shaking hands and hugging at center ring when it was all over.

I knew that Vale and Severn alone wouldn't fill the building, even with Vale's students buying and selling tickets for us. So I stacked the card with what I felt was an all-star lineup: Road Warrior Hawk versus Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart, Greg "The Hammer" Valentine versus Tito Santana, Junkyard Dog versus the Warlord, Abdullah the Butcher versus Sabu, Dustin Rhodes (as Goldust) versus Dory Funk Jr., the Steiner Brothers versus Terry "Bam Bam" Gordy and Steve "Dr. Death" Williams, and Hercules Hernandez versus the Ultimate Warrior.

Of everyone I booked, the only flies in the ointment were the Steiners and the former Jim Hellwig, who two years earlier had legally changed his name to Warrior. The Steiners' attorney, Jim Kapenstein, insisted they had to win their match against

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

The ultimate headache — the wrestler formerly known as Jim Hellwig

Gordy and Williams, and he even drew up an agreement to that effect. As for Warrior, after agreeing to the booking for a $2,000 payday — which I was only willing to pay because it would have been his first booking in the U.S. since going into seclusion — he pulled out after a few days, saying he needed more money. He again agreed to the booking when I upped his pay to $3,000 but pulled out again after a few days, saying he needed $6,000. When I finally told him I would pay him $4,500 and not a penny more and that his pay had to include four personal appearances plus all the media I needed him to do to promote the event, he agreed to the new deal and that's where we ended up.

With the top independent card of 1995 all set and ready to go, John Mese began dragging his feet on the money. Every time I spoke with him, it was a different excuse. I had seen this before, and I immediately gave him an out, saying that if he couldn't back the deal or had changed his mind I would understand and go on my merry way. But John kept insisting that he wanted to back the show and this Danny person would put up the money. He even pulled my deposit slip out of his briefcase to show me he still had it and said that as soon as he had the money he would deposit it into my account.

But time was running out to promote the show, and by mid-July, with only four weeks to go, there was no way we were going to pull it off. John finally said there was a glitch with Danny and that he was in the Bahamas and it would be mid-August before he'd be able to deposit anything. He suggested we delay the event until October and start looking at the foreign tours in the meantime.

Everything he said told me there was a major problem. Things just didn't make sense. My gut said John sincerely wanted to back the show, since essentially it was his idea, and that he wanted to do the tours. But I began to wonder if Danny even existed.

On July 24th, the U.S. government's case against my former partners wrapped up, and Adi Dara Dubash (Alex) was sentenced to 22 months in prison plus three years probation and a $6,000 fine by a federal grand jury. The next day, Peter was sentenced to three years of probation and was required to pay a mandatory special assessment. Both Alex and Peter pled guilty and cooperated with the courts to apprehend others involved in the smuggling. Thank goodness that mess was over, and I could now finally move on — the worst was behind me.

Or so I thought . . .

In early August, after having canceled all the talent for the big Miami show, I got a call from John that finances for everything were just about set and that I should come into his office to wrap everything up.

On Wednesday morning, August 9th, I arrived around 11:00 for the meeting at John's office, and there were squad cars everywhere. The place was crawling with police; there must have been 10 plainclothes detectives in the front lobby when I walked in, and all at once they turned their heads in my direction.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

"Howard Brody," I said. "I have an appointment with John Mese."

At that point Stuart Cooper came out of his office to greet me.

"What's going on?" I asked Stuart, noticing detectives out of the corner of my eye in Mese's private office, going through his desk and filing cabinets.

"We have a little issue here," he said. "Would you call me at home later?"

"Where's John? We had a meeting."

"Just call me later," he reiterated. "I have to help these guys. There's a lot to do. You have to go now."

I had no clue what was going on, but it didn't look good. As soon as I got home I called Craig and told him what had happened. The first thing we thought was maybe it was drugs, and with John owning a gym and being in the bodybuilding business, we also thought maybe it had something to do with steroids.

I finally heard from Stuart Cooper, but he didn't know much more than I did, except that the police showed up with a search warrant and he was helping the authorities. Stuart said he had tried contacting John himself and wasn't able to reach him. He told me that if he heard anything he would call me.

Thursday was more of the same. Nobody seemed to know anything. It was as if John had disappeared.

Then on Friday morning I got a call from Craig.

"Did you see the *Herald* this morning?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Open it up and turn to page 2B of the local section." Craig had a seriousness in his voice I hadn't heard in a long time.

Since I hadn't brought the paper in from outside yet, with Craig still on the phone, I went to the front of my apartment and got the newspaper.

Holy shit!

The headline jumped off the page: "ACCOUNTANT CHARGED IN KIDNAPPING, ATTEMPTED MURDER."

"Let me call you back," I said, mesmerized, and then I began reading.

> John Carl Mese, a certified public accountant also active on the bodybuilding circuit, was arrested on attempted murder, kidnapping and money-laundering charges Thursday in connection with the alleged extortion of a Miami restaurant owner. The charges link Mese to the same gang suspected of murdering a wealthy Hungarian couple, Frank Griga and Krisztina Furton, whose dismembered corpses were found June 10 stuffed into two 55-gallon drums. Mese, 56, is the sixth person charged . . .

I'd gone from associating with convicted smugglers to potential murderers.

A million things went through my mind — and the very first were the questions Bob Cohen had asked Craig and I when we first wanted to bring outside investors into WWOW: "How do you know who these people are? How do you know that if things don't work out, one of them isn't going to make trouble?"

On the day I was supposed to meet John Carl Mese at the bodybuilding event, he couldn't talk because he'd been escorted out of the building and taken into police custody for questioning — that was why the Knight Center was crawling with cops.

Among the others charged were Daniel Lugo, manager of the Sun Gym — the mystery investor John had referred to only as "Danny" — and Noel "Adrian" Doorbal, Lugo's friend and another gym employee. It seemed Meese had a long history of hiring the wrong people — many of his former managers were colorful villains, including an ex-cop who, in 1983, got involved in the ultimate reverse sting, leading three drug dealers out to the Florida Everglades and executing them. That ex-cop was Gil Fernandez Jr. the bodybuilder who posed for my radio show brochure.

I was concerned at the time of John's arrest because the deposit slip I had given

him was still in his possession and he was an authorized signer on my bank account. I was worried that somehow I would be implicated, especially if they were charging him with money laundering. And what if these guys had never been busted? What if John and his partners had made the investment as they intended and the overseas shows either made money as projected or bombed horribly? Would I have ended up in a 55-gallon drum hacked up into small pieces because they would be greedy or mad?

Those questions scared me enough to step forward and reach out to the investigating detective on the case. My sworn statement to Sgt. Felix Jimenez, would lead me to become a key witness for the prosecution.

Although John's participation in the grisly murders was not direct, it seemingly started the previous November, when Marc Schiller disappeared from his Schlotzsky's Deli franchise in Miami. Over the next month Schiller was chained to a warehouse wall and brutally tortured, forced to sign away his house, cars, properties and investments, bank accounts and even a life insurance policy that gave the Sun Gym gang a $2 million bonus if he died. Lugo systematically looted all of Schiller's property, eventually taking more than $1.2 million in assets.

Lugo, Doorbal and others attempted to kill Schiller by staging an automobile accident. After force feeding Schiller sleeping pills and alcohol for three days, an unconscious Schiller was strapped into the driver's seat of his Toyota 4Runner. Lugo moved to the passenger side, stepped on the gas pedal and steered the vehicle toward a concrete utility pole. Just before the car collided with the pole, Lugo jumped out of the SUV. When he and Doorbal ran up to inspect the wreck, they saw Schiller was still alive.

According to testimony, Lugo wanted to ensure Schiller would not live so he splashed gasoline over him and around the interior of the 4Runner and lit it on fire. As they were pulling away from the scene, they saw Schiller remarkably open the door and stagger out of the SUV.

Not about to leave the scene with Schiller still alive, the gang tried to run him over, but the stumbling, wobbling Schiller was not an easy target to hit. They missed their staggering victim on the first pass but nailed him solidly on the second attempt. Schiller lay on the ground motionless as the 4Runner was engulfed in flames.

Schiller's story was so unbelievable that at first he was not taken seriously by police. It was only when the dismembered bodies of Griga and Furton were found and the pieces of the puzzle started coming together that investigators revisited Schiller's story and began to connect the Sun Gym gang.

It was still unfathomable to me that the so-called chief financial officer of this

torture-for-profit gang was John Carl Mese; the nice guy who wanted to back my shows. How could someone who came across so nice and sincere be involved in something so evil?

Although the details of how deep Mese was involved with Lugo and Doorbal were a little sketchy, the prosecution pulled together all sorts of incriminating evidence showing how John was involved in the money laundering aspects of the crime.

As it turned out, my testimony was presented by prosecutors as circumstantial evidence of Mese's knowledge of the plan to extort money from Griga and Furton.

To this day I remember walking into the courtroom and seeing John sitting with the other defendants. It was a bit surreal, as he waved toward me like someone who recognized an old friend from across a room and smiled, as if confident that I would not say anything incriminating. I couldn't help but feel for him because deep down I just didn't want to believe that this man could be involved in something so heinous. All I could do was answer the questions to the best of my ability and let justice take its course.

The three men, codefendants in a savage scheme to extort millions from rich Miami residents, were convicted of a long list of charges, from first-degree murder to money laundering and forgery.

On May 4th of that year, Lugo's jury convicted him of the Griga and Furton murders as well as 16 other charges, including racketeering, kidnapping, attempted extortion, theft, attempted murder, armed robbery, burglary, money laundering and forgery. Doorbal was also found guilty of the two murders plus 13 additional charges. On June 1st Doorbal's jury recommended death. A week later Lugo's panel voted for the death penalty.

John was convicted on 39 felony counts, including two counts of first-degree murder, attempted murder, racketeering and multiple counts of money laundering, fraudulent notary and forgery. On the eve of the trial the prosecution had offered him a plea bargain: nine years in state prison — he had already served two and a half years in the county jail since being arrested. John rejected the deal, and on July 21st Judge Ferrer, who overturned the racketeering and murder convictions citing insufficient evidence, sentenced the former bodybuilder to 56 years in prison.

John appealed and the state of Florida cross-appealed. The District Court of Appeal ruled that the trial judge improperly set aside the two convictions and ordered a new sentencing hearing to be conducted on those counts. On January 15, 2003, Mese was sentenced to 30 years for one count of conspiracy to commit racketeering.

While serving out his sentence, the man once dubbed as the "Strawberry

Samson" died at the Reception Medical Center in Lake Butler, Florida, on October 4, 2004, of complications from a stroke; John Carl Mese was 66 years old.

There's nothing quite like a murder to shake you out of your false sense of security. The whole situation sobered me up to the fact that you never really know who you're doing business with.

While I was never again involved with anyone quite as unscrupulous as John Carl Mese, I did have a few close calls. On the plus side, even though I encountered many more dark clouds, as cliché as it sounds, behind each one there was usually a silver lining.

The wise man avoids evil by anticipating it.
— Publilius Syrus (1st century BCE)

TWELVE

JOURNEY OF A RING WARRIOR

COURTESY JUDY KOJIMA AND FAMILY

Hiro Matsuda: a true Ring Warrior

If all difficulties were known at the outset of a long journey, most of us would never start out at all.

— Dan Rather (1931–)

By October 1995 two paths were being cleared for me. Down one was my ongoing relationship with Hiro Matsuda and Ring Warriors. The other led to the National Wrestling Alliance, a place rich in history and tradition. I was determined to travel down both for as long as I could.

I accumulated the greatest amount of experience with Ring Warriors. If not for

working with Hiro and learning patience and how to properly negotiate business contracts, I would never have been prepared to take the helm of the NWA when the opportunity arose.

When you are involved in an industry that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it's hard to separate your business life from your personal life. By December, both took unexpected turns for me.

Hiro was so pleased with my performance and the progress we were making that he made me a partner in the company. It was a small piece, but it was still a partnership. Then, after nearly a year of doing the bachelor thing, I grew tired of being around women I had little in common with.

Since my ex-wife, Sharon, and I had remained friends, we spoke every so often, and one day we met for lunch. That lunch was followed up by a dinner, and it seemed the spark was still there, as that dinner led us to begin dating again. But before the relationship progressed, Sharon and I had a heart-to-heart talk. I explained to her that, if we were going to try to make it work, because of how our marriage fell apart the first time, my business and the process of making a living would have to take priority for me over anything else. That was probably a hard thing to hear, but she knew it meant she wouldn't have to worry about living in a place that wasn't her own. She understood that my work, which might involve strange hours, would take priority, and she was willing to accept those ground rules. Before we knew it, we were once again a couple.

Ring Warriors was doing gangbusters in Europe. When we replaced the WWF on Eurosport their switchboard lit up with complaints. By the end of 1995 we were averaging four times the number of viewers the WWF's best broadcast ever had. We kicked their ass and bloodied their nose.

Hiro Matsuda, Gordon Solie and I met with Paul Alperstein of the upstart American Wrestling Federation (AWF) during the '96 NATPE convention. Paul, who I had previously met through Luna Vachon, was a nice guy with a bad gambling habit. When WSW filed for its Ring Warriors trademark, the AWF had an application in for Warriors of Wrestling, so he agreed not to contest our application if we didn't contest theirs. I knew that Paul was blowing through a lot of money by paying his bookers (Sgt. Slaughter and Tito Santana) ridiculous amounts of money ($225,000 each), and although he had a great deal of financing from his father — who had one of the first companies to distribute debit machines — I knew sooner or later his dad would cut him off if he continued to bleed money. Considering WSW was on the verge of something huge with LCI, I thought perhaps there was a way to leverage Paul's financing as an investment in WSW. Hiro and I knew it would just be a matter of time before the AWF folded because we felt their product couldn't

compete. Nothing positive came out of that meeting, and, as we predicted, the AWF was soon out of business. Paul went from having millions in the bank to working as a pizza maker somewhere in Illinois.

At the same convention, I was heading to a meeting with LCI when I saw Hulk Hogan and Jimmy Hart posing for photos at the Time Warner booth. Jimmy waved when he saw me, and I started speaking to Sharon Sidello, who was WCW's vice president of international development and syndication. Hiro had introduced me to Sharon in Cannes at MIPCOM, and we had become fairly friendly. Sharon was married to Ole Anderson at the time, which I'm sure made for an interesting dynamic. As I was finishing up my conversation with Sharon, Eric Bischoff was finishing a side conversation with what appeared to be Turner executives, and although he was as nice as can be, he came across as the picture of arrogance.

"Hey," he said, recognizing my face in the crowd that gathered around the Time Warner booth.

"How are you, Eric?" I asked, extending my hand.

"Great," he said as he shook my hand firmly. "I've got Vince on the ropes, man. I'm gonna put that son of a bitch out of business." Eric then reached into his pocket and gave me two VIP passes to the show WCW was doing at Caesar's Palace that night — a live *Nitro*. "Come on down to the show tonight," he said as he moved on quickly to the next familiar face he saw.

After pocketing the tickets, I made my way to find Hiro. Gordon, who had grown tired from all the walking around, had gone back to the hotel to rest. After a brief conversation, Hiro and I headed to meet Al Kahn at the LCI/4Kids booth, and on the way, another unusual thing happened: Hiro met Vince McMahon Jr. for the first time.

Unable to avoid walking past the WWF booth to get to our destination, it was a bit of a bottleneck, as several WCW wrestlers had met up with their WWF counterparts and were jabbering. The late Brian Pillman, who had recently joined the WWF, was the first to spot Hiro and came right over, handing me a camera to take a picture of the two of them; Hiro, who was well respected by the boys, had booked Brian several times for New Japan Pro Wrestling while he was under contract with WCW. Then, just when we thought we'd get away undetected by anyone else, Ted DiBiase spotted Hiro. After they exchanged greetings, DiBiase told me how he had learned so much from being on the road with Hiro, Killer Karl Kox and others. While they continued chatting, off to my right Ric Flair was talking with Vince, but I could sense he was keeping an open ear to Hiro. Just then DiBiase asked Hiro, "Do you know Vince?"

"No," he said, "I never met him before."

"Let me introduce you."

I don't think Hiro really wanted to meet Vince, considering we were still in competition with them in Europe and if everything went well with LCI we would be competing with them in the States too. DiBiase turned around and tapped Vince on the shoulder, apologizing for interrupting him as he was finishing up with Ric.

"Vince," Ted said, "I'd like to introduce you to Hiro Matsuda."

Vince extended his hand. "This is truly a pleasure," he said. "I want to thank you for all the great work you've done over the years in training the boys; they owe you quite a debt. Everyone speaks so very highly of you."

Hiro was a little taken back by Vince's compliment.

"Thank you," he said, humbled. "I knew your father very well. He was a great man."

I wasn't sure if Vince appreciated the statement or not, considering many of the old-timers seemed to have that same adoration for Vince's dad but Junior had far surpassed anything his old man had done in the industry.

"It really is a pleasure," Vince said as he once again shook Hiro's hand, "But I have to get to another meeting." He then said something that peaked Hiro's interest. "We should talk again," Vince suggested. "Maybe we can do some business together."

As we finally made our way past the WWF booth and headed for LCI, Hiro had somewhat of a satisfied look on his face. I could tell he was contemplating something.

"What?" I asked.

Hiro grinned a little. "Maybe one day WWF versus Ring Warriors at the Tokyo Dome," he said. I knew one of Hiro's dreams was to run a show at Madison Square Garden, but the Tokyo Dome?

"Who would you put on top?" I asked, playing along with the fantasy.

"Great Muta versus Undertaker," he answered quickly.

"Why?"

"Curiosity," he said. "People never saw it before."

We wrapped up the conversation just as we arrived at LCI's booth.

Al Kahn and his all-star squad had done an unbelievable job of positioning Ring Warriors to be successful for the upcoming television season. They had gotten commitments from CBS to run Ring Warriors on their owned and operated stations beginning in the fall, which meant we would be on in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles among other major markets. Plus, LCI had created and had developed a Saturday morning cartoon series for us called "Adventures of the Ring Warriors,"

in which characters like Big Van Vader and Jushin Liger would lead dual identities as wrestlers during the day and superheroes at night, fighting a secret organization hell-bent on taking over the world. We had to jump through some major hoops to get licensing rights for Vader, Liger, Tiger Mask and other characters that were initially created by Japanese manga artists, but Hiro was able to work out arrangements with each of the owners to keep everything legit. At one point we tried to obtain licensing rights for two other popular Japanese manga characters, *Ultraman* and *8 Man*, to incorporate them into Ring Warriors and the subsequent animated series. Unfortunately, there was so much red tape involved with those particular properties that we dropped the idea.

LCI had set up a brief meeting for Hiro and I with the executives of Bandai USA since Bandai was going to fund us through a master toy license. Founded in 1950, Bandai was Japan's leading toy company.

After meeting with Bandai, we left so Al and his team could make the presentation to get them on board. Their relationship with Bandai was such that there was really no need for us to be there, so we left things in Al's capable hands. The attitude of the Bandai executives gave Hiro and I the sense that the presentation was just a formality as they gave us every indication that we would be doing business together. However, up to that point everything had been in the talking stages between LCI and Bandai, and their executives had not yet seen any of our footage. They had heard about the footage and heard about the proposed cartoon series, but they had not seen it.

When Hiro and I returned to LCI's booth later in the day, Al pulled me to the side to speak with me privately. It was apparent he did not want to talk to me in front of Hiro.

"We have a little problem," he said, as we walked to a secluded area, away from anyone who could hear us.

"What kind of problem?" I asked.

"I need you to be honest with me, Howard. There is a lot of money riding on this. Is New Japan a partner in your company?" I could see Al had a very concerned look on his face.

"Only in the sense that we are using their footage," I responded. "But we don't even license the footage from them," I reminded him. "We license the footage from TV Asahi." I was a bit confused because Al already knew this. He also knew the primary reason for getting his company involved was to do our own production, without any reliance on NJPW whatsoever.

"What about Inoki?" he then asked. "How involved is he?"

"He's not."

It was obvious Al had something else on his mind.

"What gives?" I asked. "What's going on?"

Al hesitated at first but then proceeded: "Is Inoki involved with the *yakuza*?"

"What's the *yakuza*?" I asked, not familiar with the term.

"The Japanese Mafia," he responded. "Is Inoki involved with them?"

"I have no idea," I said, fairly shocked. "I wouldn't think so. But, even if he was, what does that have to do with us?" I asked.

"Bandai won't do business with you if Inoki or New Japan is involved in any way. They said he has ties to the *yakuza* and they won't do business with the *yakuza*." Then Al asked me straight up, "Is Hiro involved with the *yakuza*?"

I was surprised he even asked that question, but I could certainly understand his concern if he thought Inoki was involved with us, and Bandai, who was putting millions into one of his properties, was telling him Inoki was connected to organized crime.

"Of course not," I shot back without hesitation. "That's ridiculous."

Although Al apologized for asking, he said he had to be absolutely sure because Inoki's name coming up caught him off guard and was a bit embarrassing for him. He told me now that he understood what the relationship was he would personally go back to Bandai to explain in great detail that neither NJPW nor Inoki were involved in any way.

When I asked him if he thought Bandai would still be willing to do business with us, he was blunt, saying that although he'd try to make it work because there was so much money involved, he thought the door was closed and the deal was unsalvageable. He also said if that were the case, then LCI would have to go back to the drawing board to see if they could find another company to sign on as the master toy licensee — but it would most likely push our launch back several months.

When Al and I walked back over to Hiro, he immediately saw concern on our faces. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'll let Howard explain it," Al said, excusing himself to go to another meeting.

As Al Kahn walked off to his next appointment, I related everything he said to Hiro.

When I asked Hiro if Inoki was involved with the *yakuza*, he told me no. He explained to me that they had not been part of the wrestling business in Japan since the days of Rikidōzan, when a gangster named Katsuji Murata, who belonged to the Boryōkudan Sumiyoshi-ikka (a *yakuza* faction), stabbed the "Father of Puroresu" at a Tokyo nightclub.

Hiro usually hid his emotions pretty well, and for the first time I could see anger

and frustration bubble across his face. At first I wasn't sure if it was because he knew about Inoki and had been keeping quiet about it or if it was because Al knew something about Inoki that he didn't; Hiro didn't live in Japan anymore, and he really wasn't privy to what went on in Japan on a daily basis unless somebody filled him in, and that's not exactly the type of thing one would talk about over the telephone. Or perhaps Hiro was just angry and frustrated that rumors and hearsay about somebody who wasn't even part of our company would prevent us from doing business.

Unfortunately Al's prognosis was right: the Bandai deal was dead. Despite their connections and power in the television, licensing and merchandising industries, LCI/4Kids was unable to find another company willing to step up to be our master toy licensee. Without the millions of dollars necessary to launch a successful national campaign in the U.S. to compete with WCW or the WWF, we were right back to where we were when we first met them, except now we had a new brand name. Over time, LCI canceled our agreement and we parted ways. It was as if somebody handed us the keys to Fort Knox. We put it in our pocket for safe keeping, but found that we had a hole in our pocket when we went back later to retrieve it. Opportunity had slipped away from us, and we both knew it.

For me the disappointment was par for the course, but Hiro took the whole thing pretty hard. While this will sound odd, especially considering his place in history as training some of the most well-known workers and box office draws to ever step foot inside a squared circle — Hulk Hogan, Paul Orndorff, Bob Orton Jr., Lex Luger, Scott Hall, the Great Muta (Keiji Mutoh), Brian Blair, Ron Simmons, Mike Graham, Steve Keirn, Hercules Hernandez and many others — Hiro wouldn't consider himself successful until Ring Warriors was a thriving, active promotion that could stand on its own.

So stubborn was Hiro that in October 1996, when the Cauliflower Alley Club approached him to be one of their honorees at their only Tampa event, where they would pay tribute to such staples of Florida wrestling as Eddie Graham, the Great Malenko, Jack and Jerry Brisco, Wahoo McDaniel, Angelo Poffo and Gordon, Hiro respectfully declined.

When I asked him why he turned down the invitation, he told me, "I got one more thing to accomplish, kid."

In the six years Hiro Matsuda and I worked together, I got to learn quite a bit about this very complex man, and perhaps aside from his wife, Judy, and daughters Heather and Stephanie, I understood him better than anybody else. Although I started working for him as a commission-only salesperson, over time I had not only become his business partner and confidant, but as Judy once put it to me, his best friend. Fortunately Hiro shared many of his life stories with me while we traveled,

and to really understand why he thought the way he did, I think you have to look at parts of his life to fully appreciate what drove and inspired him.

Hiro was born Yasuhiro Kojima on July 22, 1937, in Yokohama, Japan. His parents owned a small vegetable market in the once small fishing village, now a hub of Japanese industry. During World War II, when the allies started bombing the Yokohama factories, Yasuhiro's parents sent him off to live with an uncle in a small farming village in the countryside of Kanagawa Prefecture to keep him safe.

In school Hiro was quite the athlete, accelerating in both sumo wrestling and baseball. By the time the left-handed thrower reached high school, the pitcher/outfielder hoped to be seen by scouts, as he dreamed of one day becoming a professional baseball player. But it would be during his senior year of high school that another "sport" took hold of his interest.

Since his family did not own a television set, Hiro only caught glimpses of professional wrestling while at the local train station. There he saw his future mentor Rikidōzan (Mitsuhiro Momota) defeat one American wrestler after another and become somewhat of a national hero. The Japanese needed someone who could stand up to the Americans, and Rikidōzan became that someone, gaining immense popularity in the process. Rikidōzan's American opponents portrayed themselves as heels that often "cheated" during their matches.

What was not known by the fans, however, was that Rikidōzan was actually Korean and not Japanese. Born Kim Sin-Nak, Rikidōzan was adopted when he was a young boy and training to be a sumo wrestler by a farmer and his family from the Nagasaki Prefecture whose last name was Momota. From 1940 to 1950 "Mitsuhiro Momota" competed as a sumo before being discovered by Bobby Bruns and Tosh Togo (Harold "Oddjob" Sakata) and debuting as a pro wrestler at the age of 27 in 1951.

Around the same time that Hiro was falling in love with professional wrestling, he began noticing that the American servicemen who were stationed in Japan during the occupation always had money to buy luxury items like chocolate bars, chewing gum and other candy, which they sometimes gave to the local children. Because his family was so poor, Hiro thought all Americans must be rich and began dreaming of traveling to the U.S., wondering what a country of such abundant wealth might be like.

It was then that Hiro connected the dots between the United States and professional wrestling, realizing that the U.S. had wrestlers like he had seen on television, and he decided that's what he wanted to do with his life.

In June 1956 a six-foot-one, 190-pound, soon to be 19-year-old by the name of

Hiro Kojima took two high school friends with him for support and ventured to Rikidōzan's home, hoping to become a professional wrestler. To put things into perspective, in 1956 this would be like some high school kid from the sticks going to Mickey Mantle's house and looking to become a baseball player.

Not shy, Hiro knocked on the front door. After telling the young wrestler who answered it that he wanted to become a professional wrestler, after being sized up, he was led inside to meet Rikidōzan. When Hiro walked in he realized he was in the dining area, and he was shocked at what he saw — never had he seen so much food in one place before. Rikidōzan was in the middle of having lunch, and although Hiro apologized for interrupting him, Rikidōzan invited the young man to sit and eat with him.

For Hiro it was the first time he had ever eaten red meat because his family couldn't afford such a lavish item at the time. After watching Hiro eat as much food as he possibly could and realizing his desire to become a professional wrestler was genuine, Rikidōzan agreed to break Hiro into the business and told him to be at his gym the next day.

Hiro's training immediately began under the watchful eyes of Isao Yoshihara, Junzo Hasegawa (a.k.a. Yoshinosato) and Michiharu Sadano (a.k.a. Toyonobori), even though Rikidōzan was considered his sensei. By August he was on tour with Rikidōzan's Japan Pro-Wrestling Association (JWA) as part of the ring crew and seeing much of his homeland for the first time.

By 1957, with six months of solid training under his belt, Hiro had his first match at the Naha Baseball Stadium in Okinawa. On the second night of the tour, two people came to the ring to challenge Rikidōzan; one was a black belt in karate, and the other was a U.S. Marine.

After the last match, Rikidōzan sent Hiro out to "take care" of the two guys. After stretching the karate guy, the Marine backed out and Hiro went back to the dressing room proud, hoping to be praised by Rikidōzan. Instead, as soon as he walked into the dressing room he was met with several slaps to the face. Rikidōzan berated the young Kojima for not making the contest last longer; nobody had smartened him up. Although he could not disrespect his sensei in front of the others, Hiro was enraged, thinking that he had put his life on the line for Rikidōzan's honor and reputation. Seeing how angry Hiro was getting, Toyonobori stepped in and moved the young wrestler out of harm's way before he did anything he would later regret. Although Toyonobori told Hiro that Rikidōzan was actually proud of him but didn't know how to show it, Hiro had lost respect for his sensei.

When the tour was over and Hiro was back in Tokyo training at the gym with Yoshihara and Yoshinosato, Rikidōzan came in and wanted to work in the ring with

him. After a while, however, Rikidōzan became frustrated when he couldn't take Hiro down. When they were done with their session in the ring, Rikidōzan told Hiro that if he wanted to make it to the U.S. he would have to get bigger and told Hiro he needed to join the ranks of sumo wrestling. Once he would make a name for himself in sumo, he would be able to make a name for himself in pro wrestling. However, Hiro refused to believe he had to go the route of sumo wrestling in order to make it as a pro and quit the JWA promotion. For many years it was thought that Rikidōzan had barred Hiro from wrestling in Japan, but that wasn't true; the choice was Hiro's. He promised himself that he would make it to the U.S. on his own, and when he did Rikidōzan would see that he was wrong about Hiro.

Getting to the U.S. was an odyssey for Hiro. His mother had an uncle who lived in Lima, Peru, and that became the route he would take to get into the U.S. It took three years of jumping through hoops and government red tape, and when it finally came time for Hiro to leave Japan, he told his parents that if he didn't succeed they would never see him again.

In Peru, Hiro worked for Max Aguirre, a former fighter who promoted both boxing and wrestling. As the first Japanese wrestler to be seen in Lima, the newly named Ernesto Kojima became an instant box office attraction. Before long he became friends with Rudi and Tito Montez, two brothers who primarily wrestled out of Mexico City and who were able to get him a spot wrestling for Empresa Mexicana de la Lucha Libre (EMLL). Under the ring name of Suhiro Kojima, Hiro met Gory Guerrero, patriarch of the famous Guerrero wrestling family. The first day they met, Gory invited Hiro to work with him in the ring shoot style. In front of all the other wrestlers, Hiro got the best of Gory and threw him to the mat several times, which shocked the others as Gory had a reputation of being a shooter. Immediately Gory respected Hiro, and they became longtime friends. Soon after that display the wrestlers in Mexico gave Hiro the nickname Todo Pistolero, which literally translated to "all gunman" — meaning that he could "shoot" with anyone.

By 1961 Hiro finally made it to the U.S., working for Houston promoter Morris Sigel under the ring name Kojima Saito as that was what his immigration papers showed his name to be. While in Texas Hiro broke one of his ankles, and because he didn't allow it time to properly heal, working on it prematurely and suffering through the pain, he would be hampered by the ankle from time to time through the years. Also while in Texas he met up with Duke Keomuka for the first time. Duke took Hiro under his wing and became somewhat of a father figure to him. It was Duke who convinced Hiro to go to St. Joseph, Missouri, to work for promoter Gus Karras, who would give Hiro the ring name Matsuda in honor of his friend, a wrestler from the 1920s and 1930s named Matty Matsuda. (Some historians have

COURTESY TOKYO SPORTS

Matsuda meets the legendary Ed "Strangler" Lewis at promoter Leroy McGuirk's house

incorrectly identified Sorakichi Matsuda, the first Japanese pro wrestler in the U.S. during the 1880s, as the inspiration for Hiro's new ring name.) From St. Joseph Hiro branched out to working in St. Louis and Kansas City before getting the call to go to work for Leroy McGuirk in Oklahoma.

Once in Oklahoma, Hiro started to gain recognition from his peers and other promoters for his work ethic. He was really put to the test by being booked to work then NWA World Heavyweight Champion Pat O'Connor. In a prelude to feuding with perennial NWA World Junior Heavyweight Champion Danny Hodge, Hiro wrestled O'Connor to a 60-minute Broadway, thus establishing his ability as an in-ring performer with the Oklahoma crowd. Many wrestling historians believe that Hodge was pound-for-pound the greatest shooter to ever step foot inside a squared circle, and as such he needed an opponent worthy of challenging him. Hodge was the first wrestler ever to appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (April 1, 1957), having captured the silver medal in men's freestyle wrestling at the 1956 Melbourne, Australia, Summer Olympics.

The respect and admiration between Hodge and Hiro was immeasurable. Hiro always felt his best matches were with Hodge because as he once put it, Danny Hodge could bring out the best in him while teaching him at the same time. In 1998, while I was president of the NWA, we brought Hodge to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, as part of the NWA's 50th anniversary celebration. When I gave him a special message of regards from Hiro, he simply put his hands together in a prayer-like position and bowed respectfully.

While still working a program with Hodge in Oklahoma, Hiro got a call from "Cowboy" Luttrell with an offer to go to Florida. Grizzly Smith, who had worked with Hiro in Oklahoma, was now in the Sunshine State and suggested Hiro to Luttrell as the territory needed another top heel to go along with Malenko. Hiro made his Florida debut in Jacksonville in December 1962.

There's no doubt that Hiro had his greatest success in Florida and established lifelong friendships with the likes of Eddie Graham and Don Curtis there. After six

weeks of working the Florida territory, Hiro finally made it to the main event, and in a match that nearly sold out the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory in Tampa, Matsuda upset Graham for the NWA southern heavyweight championship — his first of many titles.

While Hiro continued to carve out a successful niche for himself in the U.S., in the back of his mind he always thought about how he had left Japan and wondered what his onetime sensei Rikidōzan would think of him. When *Nikkan Sports* ran a story about Hiro's recent southern title win, overall success and that he was slated to wrestle Lou Thesz in an upcoming match for the world title, word got back to Hiro that Rikidōzan said, "I am very proud of Kojima."

While the true declaration of success for Hiro was that more people in the U.S. knew his name than Rikidōzan's, he was still driven to prove something to his former sensei. Hiro was obsessed with getting that final affirmation he needed.

Hiro once told me one of the greatest thrills he ever had as a wrestler was when he and Thesz drew 5,600 people to the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory during 1963 for a world title match because it was Rikidōzan's match with Thesz that established him as a legend in Japan.

Taking the first in a best two-out-of-three falls match, although Hiro lost the bout, he knew what it felt like to pin the world champion in the ring, and afterward Lou told Hiro he showed great promise. Lou told Hiro that with time he could main event anywhere in the world. Hiro knew he wanted to main event in Tokyo against Rikidōzan.

With his ever increasing confidence, in late '63 Hiro sought out what he felt was the final preparation he needed for a trip back to Japan for a match with Rikidōzan. Hiro sought to train with the person he had been told was the best heavyweight wrestler in the world, Karl Gotch. Hiro once told me that training with Gotch was the most intense three months of training he ever went through; this coming from a man who was said to have unparalleled endurance in the wrestling business, doing hundreds of squats and sit-ups a day. Hiro explained that Gotch would carry him on his shoulders and run up and down the stairs of an arena from the floor to the top row and back down all the way around in a circle, until they were right back where they started from — and when they were done, they would switch places so it would be Hiro's turn to carry Karl. It was apparent much of Hiro's discipline he learned from Karl. He also learned and perfected his signature move, the German suplex, while under Karl's tutelage.

Unfortunately, before Hiro's training ended, he received word from Japan about Rikidōzan's death. He would never prove to his former sensei that he had made it on his own and face him in a main event. Rikidōzan's death affected Hiro in many

COURTESY TOKYO SPORTS

Matsuda hip tosses Danny Hodge during one of their many battles

ways, as he lost his heart and his focus. But with someone as determined as Hiro, it would only be a matter of time before he had a new personal goal.

Back in Florida, Leroy McGuirk called "Cowboy" Luttrell, wanting to send Danny Hodge to the Sunshine State. After three weeks of establishing Hodge with the Florida fans, another Hodge-Matsuda match was booked. This time Hiro would take the best two-out-of-three falls July contest, earning him his first of two NWA world junior heavyweight titles and a place in history as the first Japanese-born wrestler to do so. Hiro kept the strap for nine months before dropping it back to Hodge in April 1965, and by that time Hiro was back in Oklahoma. But he wanted new opponents and he wanted to go back to Florida, plus he felt the time was finally right to go back to Japan to see his parents.

Hiro arrived back in his native country after nearly five years with much fanfare. Because news of his return had appeared in the newspapers in advance, almost 500 wrestling fans showed up to greet him. Although he hid his feelings well, the reunion with his parents was emotionally charged. Hiro was also a bit overwhelmed as photographers snapped away. The only thing missing, he thought, was Rikidōzan.

Although he didn't wrestle while in Japan because he had severely sprained the ankle he had broken, many in the press speculated that Hiro would stay in Japan permanently when he appeared on JWA television, but that was never his plan as he intended to go back to the U.S. and marry the woman he loved, which is exactly what he did.

Following Rikidōzan's death, pro wrestling in Japan was in upheaval with many people jockeying for power. While the JWA continued on as a promotion, it's four-member executive board — Toyonobori, Yoshinosato, Michiaki Yoshimura and Kokichi Endo — would take actions and make decisions that would forever change the landscape of Japanese wrestling. That first move was deciding to start pushing Shohei "Giant" Baba as the next top star to take Rikidōzan's place, even though Antonio Inoki was the better athlete.

By mid-1966, feeling pushed by some of the other board members, Toyonobori was forced to tender his resignation and left the organization, enabling Yoshinosato to take the lead role in the company.

Later that year, Hiro did his first and last tour for JWA, taking Duke Keomuka with him. While on tour Yoshihara talked to Hiro about some issues he was having with Endo, who was the company treasurer, and said he did not agree with the way the office was doing business. Yoshihara confided to Hiro that he wanted to quit the JWA and start his own company in opposition. He wanted Hiro to be his partner. Because they were good friends and Yoshihara had helped train Hiro in the beginning, Matsuda agreed to help his old friend.

Returning to Florida after the one-month tour, Hiro began preparing for the new Japanese company, which was to begin in January 1967. The ace in the hole for the new group was that Yoshihara had a friend who was the program director of Tokyo Broadcasting System, and with TBS behind them, half the battle was won.

In October 1966 Yoshihara resigned from JWA and announced that a new pro wrestling company would start in January, International Wrestling Enterprise (IWE), with Hiro being billed as its top Japanese star. However, just before Yoshihara announced the formation of IWE, another new promotion in Japan was starting.

Toyonobori, Inoki and future NJPW chairman Hisashi Shimma launched a company called Tokyo Pro-Wrestling. Toyonobori, a former JWA board member, convinced Inoki — who was said to have been jealous of Baba's push and who was coming back from an extended stay in the U.S. — to join him in the startup. Unlike Matsuda, who was relatively unknown when he left Japan, Inoki was a rising star for JWA before going to the States, but he gained major credentials having won versions of the NWA world tag team titles in Texas (with Duke) and Tennessee (with Hiro), and having feuded with NWA United States heavyweight champion Johnny Valentine (who held various versions of the title in California, Michigan and Ontario). By feuding with Valentine, Inoki was instantly established as a rising star and showed he was a tough wrestler who could take on any opponent. Plus, with Valentine recognized as champion by Tokyo Pro, Inoki had a ready-made championship all set to win.

COURTESY TOKYO SPORTS

NWA world tag team champs Antonio Inoki and Hiro Matsuda

Unfortunately for Tokyo Pro and subsequently Inoki, a rift between Toyonobori and his financiers led him to declare bankruptcy and dissolve the promotion after only a few months. With Inoki now available, Hiro asked him if he wanted to join with them for the first IWE tour, knowing that another strong, rising star, would help them draw. Inoki accepted the invitation and became part of the IWE roster.

The IWE did a couple of tours that drew respectably, combining the strength of Japanese stars Matsuda, Inoki and Masao Kimura (a.k.a. Rusher Kimura) with such Americans as Eddie Graham, Sam Steamboat, Bill Dromo and the Kentuckian (Grizzly Smith). But the most important part of the tour was whether or not they could secure a television deal. Just as it was 30 years later for Ring Warriors, if IWE did not have a television contract there was no way they could run a successful promotion.

IWE did phenomenally well, however, drawing a 70 share in a test market for the TBS affiliate in Oita, which meant 70 percent of all television sets were watching their program. TBS gave them the green light to produce the show nationally.

While Hiro was back in the U.S. preparing for the third tour and making plans with his wife to move to Japan, Yoshihara brought in a third partner without asking him. Previously he and Hiro had agreed to an equal split. The agreement was Yoshihara would find the financial investors and Hiro would supply the talent. But because the deal changed and Hiro wasn't consulted, he decided to pull out. As much as he wanted to be involved and wanted IWE to succeed, Hiro didn't like that his partner would do something so important without discussing it with him first.

Although Yoshihara and the new partner flew to the U.S. in an attempt to convince Hiro to change his mind and stay on board, he adamantly refused.

With Hiro no longer involved, Inoki followed him out the door and returned to JWA, where he formed a tag team with once and future rival Giant Baba.

With their talent depleted, IWE ran for three years before folding. Hiro always thought the main reason it went out of business was because they had no significant American wrestlers, and that was partially true. Without big name Japanese stars or their American counterparts, IWE began drawing poorly. TBS began questioning some of IWE's moves. In an attempt to ensure they would not lose TV, Yoshihara let TBS take control of the company, and they made several bad decisions. The poor product led to bad ratings, and they eventually lost their TV, which was the kiss of death.

JWA eventually suffered a similar fate as IWE. Within a few years Inoki left to start NJPW, and Baba departed to start AJPW with the help of Nippon TV. JWA no longer dominated the Japanese pro wrestling scene. Although Seiji Sakaguchi, who was the third top guy after Inoki and Baba, announced that JWA and NJPW would merge, Kintaro Ohki, the top star at the time, decided to keep JWA "alive" and the planned merger was kiboshed. JWA would not be able to hold on for long, and by the end of the '70s there was only the big two — NJPW and AJPW.

Hiro's involvement in the short-lived IWE planted the seeds of what would become Ring Warriors. And even though Hiro would try his hand at other businesses that would eventually fail — a wrestling uniform company, a judo school with Masao "Tiger" Hattori and even a tuna export business — his love was wrestling, and just as he made it to the top as a performer and trainer, he was determined to make it to the top of the business as a promoter.

Hiro went swimming with piranhas, and, despite a number of nasty bites along the way, he survived just fine. He knew first hand what the politics of the pro wrestling business really meant. In the late 1960s Eddie Graham put forth Hiro's name with the NWA board of directors to make Hiro the NWA world heavyweight champion. But Dory Funk Sr. had other ideas and lobbied for his son Dory Jr. to take the strap. Because many NWA members felt Hiro was too close with Inoki and Matsuda getting the strap would upset Baba — the primary NWA member in Japan, even though NJPW was a member too — the board sided with Funk, and in 1969 Dory took the title from Gene Kiniski. As a concession to Graham, who fought hard for Hiro, the title change took place in Tampa so the Florida office could benefit from the higher gate receipts that usually came from promoting a championship match.

Knowing what Hiro went through to get to where he was and understanding how much he wanted to be successful as a promoter, I could finally appreciate why

he felt the way he did. Hiro was not yet satisfied with himself.

There was something else driving Hiro too. Although I don't think it was professional jealousy, Hiro absolutely despised asking Inoki for help of any kind. Having relied so much on his own skill and desire to get to where he was for so many years, I think Hiro felt vulnerable anytime he went to Inoki for assistance. Unfortunately Inoki seemed to enjoy having the upper hand.

A perfect example of this took place in early spring 1996.

With Ring Warriors getting the highest ratings of any program on Eurosport and being broadcast in six languages (English, Spanish, German, French, Dutch and Italian), taking a page out of WCW's playbook — they presented a live show at NATPE — I came up with the idea to do a live Ring Warriors show in Cannes, France, at MIPCOM. Just like WCW used the live event to help expand their syndicated package, foreign coverage and sponsors, we would do the same, with the emphasis on trying to license the show into markets where we did not have coverage. Eurosport loved the idea since it would help solidify Ring Warriors as a product with global appeal, and they were willing to cosponsor the event with us. We would present the show from the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and invite all MIPCOM attendees, which included broadcasters, distributors, syndication companies, producers and sponsors plus dignitaries from the provincial government. It was going to be *the* MIPCOM event.

Leveraging some of the resources I had used before, plus some contacts provided to me by Eurosport, I began to send inquiries out to concert promoters across Europe to see if there would be interest in promoting shows as part of a Ring Warriors tour. Eurosport agreed that if we could coordinate a tour, they would promote the events on the network and work with the local promoters in select cities to see which shows could be taped or presented live. They were great business partners. All we needed now was a little cooperation from NJPW on the Japanese talent.

Hearing from his friend Masa Saito, who worked in the New Japan office, that Inoki would be in Los Angeles for some meetings regarding his World Peace Festival show in June, Hiro and I flew to L.A. to see him. Because we got into L.A. late and Inoki was tied up with other engagements, his assistant told us he would meet us the next morning at breakfast, but we would be his guests at dinner that night. Rather than stay at a hotel near the airport, we decided to stay where Inoki and his crew were staying — the Los Angeles Athletic Club, a fairly upscale five-star country club–inspired hotel and spa.

Inoki arranged for a van to pick up all his dinner guests in front of the hotel. As we stood and waited for the vehicle to arrive, wrestler Kensuke Sasaki and his wife, Akira Hokuto, also a wrestler, saw Hiro and greeted him. Just as the van pulled up,

Inoki and his little entourage came out of the hotel, and as his guests were piling in he greeted each with a bow or a handshake. When it was my turn to get on the van, which was next to last, with Hiro being the last one on before Inoki, the NJPW chairman said to me, "I see you remembered to bring your pants this time."

We were taken to a restaurant in the Japanese-American district of downtown L.A. known as Little Tokyo, one of only three official Japantowns in the U.S. Inside the restaurant we were escorted by the hostess to a private room where the dozen or so guests sat around a huge table, with Inoki sitting at the head. Hiro and I sat across from each other rather than side by side and also at the table was Steve Nakata.

Nakata, a Japanese businessman who lived and worked in L.A., was Inoki's promoter for the World Peace Festival show. Within just a few minutes, however, we could tell he was a serious mark for Inoki. He began putting Inoki over huge. To make matters worse, Nakata obviously had no idea who Hiro was, and kept trying to make Inoki seem more important than he was, citing his many accomplishments in the ring and out. What I found odd was that every time Nakata spoke Inoki had this smirk across his face . . . not like he was embarrassed by what Nakata was spewing, but rather like he was gloating. It was also odd that, considering I was the only one at the table who did not speak Japanese, the entire exchange was in English. But I didn't say a word; I knew it wasn't my place.

Hiro, however, showed great character by restraining himself. Instead of saying something that could be considered confrontational, he proved his point another way: he began baiting Nakata to tell him "more about the great things the senator has done." And the way he said it was neither exaggerated nor mean-spirited, but it was enough to let Inoki know that he didn't need to hear a line-by-line account of his résumé from some fan.

Inoki finally heard enough and told Nakata, "Mr. Matsuda knows all about my career. We are old friends."

With that Hiro and Inoki exchanged acknowledging smiles. To put it in wrestling terms, it was the social equivalent of Inoki tapping out to a Matsuda submission hold.

While that should have been the end of it, I don't think Inoki appreciated Hiro's subtle style because the next morning Inoki no-showed our scheduled meeting and instead sent Katsuji Nagashima, NJPW's chief television producer. It was a major slap in the face.

Although he didn't show it at the meeting, afterward Hiro was fuming.

"Why would he do that to you?" I asked.

"Because we have nothing," he said, obviously frustrated. "It is the same as

Tampa. Until we have our own product, our own wrestlers, New Japan will not help us."

"But this will benefit them too," I tried reasoning.

"It doesn't matter to them," Hiro explained. "They don't see it like that. They have tunnel vision. They only care about Japan."

Hiro then got quiet, which I knew meant he was so mad he didn't want to say anything he would regret. After a while he finally broke his silence. "I am not going to beg him for help," he said. "We will make it without them. Then when we do, he can kiss my ass!"

I was stunned that Hiro would say something so surly, but he often surprised me. I went with the flow, and when he said that Inoki could kiss his ass, I simply added, "In Macy's window!"

Hiro had never heard that expression before and thought it was quite funny. The original quote and context came from former President Lyndon Johnson who said, "I want real loyalty. I want someone who will kiss my ass in Macy's window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses."

Hiro threw his own spin on it, and replaced Macy's with Mitsukoshi's, which is a famous department store in Tokyo. From that point forward, whenever Hiro would get angry at NJPW or Inoki because they would not work to make things easier for us, he'd break out with "He (or they) can kiss my ass in Mitsukoshi's window!" After a while he shortened it simply to "Mitsukoshi's window!" — but I understood exactly what he meant.

Still Hiro could never let his emotional side be seen by anyone from New Japan because they were still paying him. As far back as 1986, when Sakaguchi was booking for NJPW, Hiro would help him with the American wrestlers who were coming to Japan by taking care of all the paperwork for the New Japan office. In 1990, when Saito was made the American wrestling coordinator, he engaged and hired Hiro to take care of everything in the U.S. for the office, so Hiro officially became the liaison between NJPW and WCW.

When Bischoff took control of WCW, however, he told NJPW that they didn't need Hiro to do the paperwork any longer because he had hired a person named Kazuo "Sonny" Onoo, who he'd been friends with for nearly 20 years, to take care of that for them. However, because Hiro had many friends in the New Japan front office, including Saito, Sakaguchi and Hattori, and because he'd been loyal for so many years, the company continued to pay him a modest salary, even after he became ill and right up to his death.

Still, it didn't prevent Hiro from wanting to better himself while working for them. Just before launching World Superstars of Wrestling, Inc., Hiro had a com-

pany called Matsuda Enterprises, which funded WSW. For three years Matsuda Enterprises created the hats and T-shirts for NJPW, working with its in-house merchandising company. One year he sold upward of 40,000 T-shirts. When there was an internal power struggle that led to someone new being appointed as the president of merchandising, Hiro lost the contract.

Considering there had to be a delicate balance between all the history Hiro had with NJPW and what he wanted out of life, it was no wonder Hiro wanted more than ever to make our promotion work.

Because we couldn't get the cooperation from NJPW on talent, the idea of the live Ring Warriors event in Cannes that would have been part of a 10-city European tour was off. Even though we would not have a Ring Warriors television show if not for them, it seemed NJPW gave with one hand and took away with the other.

With LCI not able to do anything without a master toy licensee and NJPW not helping on the European front, Hiro gave me the new directive of trying to find a domestic television outlet. Not only did I go to Bristol, Connecticut, to meet with programming executives at ESPN, since we were already on ESPN Asia out of Singapore, I spoke with the program directors at the two Spanish-language networks, Telemundo and Univision, which were based in Miami. Of the three, ESPN looked the most promising because we already had established relationships with their Asian network, as well as Eurosport, with who they did a lot of programming exchanges. If we were going to be on the air, however, it would most likely be on their newest network, ESPN 2. The biggest hurdle with clearing the show on ESPN was that the majority of the wrestlers, as well as the crowd, were Japanese; they wanted an "American" product. After many discussions with Bob Yalen, ESPN's manager of programming, and Marc Krigsman, their program manager (two very distinct roles with similar titles), they finally gave us to June 1st to come up with a proposal for an "American" version of Ring Warriors. Even though they were looking for more traditional sports programming, they would give us the broadcast outlet if we could deliver.

Around the same time we started seeking potential U.S. broadcasting partners, we also started looking for potential investors and corporate sponsors because the money we were getting from our licensing contracts would only take us so far. I contacted Roy Nelson, who had worked for Verne Gagne (and had smartened me up about magazine editor Virginia Bowes trying to undermine me). Roy was working for a large New York City law firm at the time, and the firm represented various investors. When I brought Roy up to speed, he jumped on the project and within a few days had a New Jersey poultry farmer who loved high-risk, high-

return investments ready to write us a check, provided we got a broadcasting outlet and some commitments from corporate sponsors.

Gordon Solie, meanwhile, knowing we were trying different avenues to get Ring Warriors on domestic television, clued me in about a friend of his named Gil Cabot who was a television producer on the West Coast. Gil had been a big wrestling fan back in the day and at one time even tried to take Gordon's announcing job, at which time Gordon befriended the young man. Years later he had a fairly impressive résumé, and, according to Gordon, he had a network of contacts ranging from corporate sponsors to network executives. When Gordon asked me if I thought Hiro would be warm to the idea of getting Gil involved I wanted to speak with him first. Within five minutes I knew the guy was for real. Based on that initial conversation, Gil struck me as someone who knew his craft, so Gordon and I arranged for Hiro and Gil to speak directly.

Although I didn't know it at the time, and I wish I had, Gil had an interesting and colorful past. He served prison time in the 1980s for convictions on half a dozen or so felony charges. In 1990 he was convicted on new charges and sentenced to more time. Official records show he was convicted for attempted extortion and conspiracy to commit extortion. The victim was Jann Carl, who is probably best known for her work on *Entertainment Tonight*. But even with that baggage, Gil Cabot came across like a guy who could get something done and that's what we needed.

Because he and Gordon were friends and he knew who Hiro was, having interviewed many wrestlers when he was a local Tampa radio announcer, he offered to help Hiro bring Ring Warriors to some potential sponsors. He already had a game plan in mind, mentioning both Levi Strauss & Co. and the Hershey Company as potential clients since he had established relationships with both companies. The only thing Gil said he needed was a better demo tape than the one we already had because, as he put it, "sponsors would be looking for certain things" that we didn't include. He was a bit vague on exactly what that was, but at first everything was fine. We shot footage of Gordon in front of a video wall as Gil wanted. We used some of the wrestling footage we previously had and then went into editing. Hiro and I sat in the same room as Gil while he worked meticulously with the video editor. Although I thought he was being a bit anal retentive on how perfect he wanted everything to be, at $250 or $300 an hour for editing time, it was starting to bother Hiro a little, and he was getting antsy. Hiro asked me if I had spoken to Roy about "the chicken man," as he used to refer to the potential investor. When I said I hadn't, Hiro asked me to call him, so I did . . . from the editing suite phone.

Big mistake!

While talking to Roy he asked me if we had a broadcaster lined up yet. I explained to him that we had a verbal commitment from ESPN to let them know by June 1st if we were going to pursue the domestic market and that we were putting a new demo tape together to bring to potential sponsors, but until an actual contract was signed it was not a finalized deal.

The next thing I know Hiro gets a fax from Gil who is backpedaling on his commitment to represent us. This after spending about $2,500 to make the video. In a fax from him dated May 7, 1996, he wrote: ". . . prior to joining you, Gordon and Howard, for the work on the video presentation, I had never been exposed to your method of operation, or more specifically, witnessing Howard lying to people. That is something I never bargained for." He further went on to write: " . . . there is no way for me to actually participate with submitting your program for potential sponsorship, now that it is clear how Howard might be dealing with those people. I will not risk my career."

Hiro couldn't understand what Gil was talking about because he was sitting right next to me when I was speaking to Roy. Then Hiro remembered something Gil had mentioned at a lunch meeting a few days before. Gil implied he had his secretary call ESPN, and she supposedly found out that there was never a verbal commitment. Hiro defended me, arguing that there was no reason for me to lie considering we were already doing business with ESPN Asia, and it led to a barrage of faxes between the two. At one point I told Hiro I would take myself out of the equation and not contact anyone Cabot was dealing with, whether sponsor or broadcaster, but he would have none of that; I was his partner.

As for ESPN, on the day I spoke to Roy from the editing suite, unbeknownst to either Hiro or I, ESPN had already sent a letter informing us they were passing on Ring Warriors. It took a week for the rejection letter to arrive. Not long after that, Roy Nelson informed me that "the chicken man" had passed away — he flew the coup, *au natural*.

Then something truly unexpected happened. While I was knocking on one set of doors, someone decided to knock on mine — it was the WWF. It wasn't Vince or Linda or any of the people one would easily recognize by name, but rather it was their senior vice president of worldwide properties, Ausbert de Arce, and he was calling to offer me a job. As he put it, I would be doing the same thing I was already doing for WSW, except that it would be for Titan Sports. If the call had come five years earlier I would have jumped at the opportunity, but too much had happened for me to accept their offer. While the money was quite a bit more than what Hiro was paying, I began thinking back. I remembered the disappointment in not getting the editor's job with them. I remembered all the aggravation they caused

around the Israeli tour and how they had forced Moshe Jossef to cancel it. I even remembered Linda McMahon's veiled attempt to threaten WSW with a lawsuit if we didn't change our name when I saw her at NATPE the year before. But, most importantly, I remembered everything Hiro had done for me. I knew the only reason the WWF was offering me the job was to try to bring down Ring Warriors. I suppose after being knocked off Eurosport, which they coveted for the large footprint the network was able to deliver, plus the fact that Ring Warriors was continuing its slow expansion into other markets, they figured the best way to remove the competition was to remove me from the equation. Didn't they understand that I knew they would get rid of me in six months once Ring Warriors was off their air?

"Tell Mr. and Mrs. McMahon that while I appreciate them thinking of me, I am very happy with my current position and therefore must decline their generous offer. Please give them my regards." And with that I hung up on the stunned executive.

Meanwhile, traveling back and forth between Tampa and Fort Lauderdale every few weeks started to become a chore and was costing our company money. When Hiro approached me about making the move to Tampa, although I hesitated at first because my family was primarily in South Florida, I decided that the best thing for business was to move to the west coast. So in November 1996 I relocated to Tampa. Sharon went with me — we had gotten engaged in September, for a second time, and were remarried the following February.

Around the time I was moving to Tampa, a promoter in Malaysia named J.S. Dhillon contacted us about promoting some shows in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and some other cities off our ESPN Asia feed. Even though NJPW wouldn't help us by sending talent to Europe at a reasonable price, they were willing to work with us closer to home, and over the next month or so we went back and forth with faxes and prices. The only problem was the guy kept insisting on booking ex-WWF talent who were not on our show. Although we tried to accommodate when possible, it got to the point that it was looking more like a WWF cast-off tour than our product. Hiro finally had enough and told me to arrange a meeting with the WWF in New Orleans (the location of the next NATPE convention) and turn over all the information and correspondences to them. Even though the WWF had tried hiring me away from WSW six months earlier, Hiro wanted to create goodwill between himself and Vince since they had finally met face-to-face and felt the best way to do that was to show them we weren't interested in treading on their name. So in January 1997, under instructions from Hiro Matsuda, I handed Vince McMahon an envelope that contained all the correspondence we had pertaining to a proposed tour of Malaysia. Vince thanked me for doing what he said was "the right thing,"

knowing full well that we'd be giving up anywhere from $25,000 to $50,000 profit on the tour — and it was money we could have used. Although I didn't realize it at the time, the goodwill of that gesture would prove to be more beneficial to the NWA than Ring Warriors.

While everything seemed to be holding steady, out of nowhere there was a new obstacle thrown at us. But this wasn't just another bump in the road — it was a solid wall, and we were about to hit it straight on.

Not very long after NATPE, we received word from Daniel Pautrat, Eurosport's deputy managing director and programming director, that they would not be renewing our contract, citing a change in direction at the network that meant they would be relying exclusively on European-produced content. Unfortunately, it was a decision that had nothing to do with our show, as we were still the top-rated program on the network, but had to do with government subsidies.

Without the income from Eurosport, we would not be able to sustain our business. We wouldn't be able to continue editing new shows, it would have a domino effect on our business model. Without new shows, once ESPN Asia, South African Broadcasting and our other licensees aired what episodes we had already delivered, we would be forced to cancel contracts, and it would just be a matter of a few months before we'd be forced to pull the plug on Ring Warriors.

But no sooner had we learned our unfortunate fate, a little ray of hope broke through the dark cloud above us. During one of my calls to Paris in an attempt to save the deal with Eurosport, Vincent Chupin, the program acquisitions manager who worked under Daniel, came up with an interesting proposal. He said if we could produce the show in Europe we could continue on their network as is. Eurosport was so accommodating that they told us if we had to go on hiatus for a few months to get everything set up they would guarantee us a spot on their prime-time network schedule as long as the shows originated from somewhere on the European continent.

Hiro and I weren't completely out of the game, but there was certainly a whole new set of challenges to overcome — and the clock was ticking.

Hiro remembered one of the contacts I had made in Miami about a year or so earlier. We had started selling some Ring Warriors merchandise online, and one of the items we sold was a collector's set of three telephone calling cards (Jushin Liger, the Great Muta and Shinya Hashimoto). One of the owners of the company we did the deal with, Dr. Lino Morris, had a number of business contacts in Europe as he was a real maven in the telecommunications industry.

Over a 30-year period, Lino had established a trustworthy reputation in the telecommunications and technology sectors of companies and governments

around the world. He designed and built facilities in the Middle East, Mexico, Brazil, Switzerland, England, France and the U.S., and served as a Science Correspondent and broadcast analyst at Cape Kennedy, from the early days of the space program through the Apollo missions. I don't use the word genius often, but it certainly fits here.

Lino had taken a liking to me, so Hiro sent me down to Miami to talk with him face-to-face. When I told him what we were up against, he tried to do what he could to help, and at one point teleconferenced his partners in Switzerland to see if they would be willing to invest a "few million dollars" into our project. Although Lino and one other partner were willing to take the risk on the spot, the others weren't so fast to jump on board, and we hit a stalemate.

Still, Lino wasn't discouraged and put me in touch with a friend of his who had contacts in the sports and entertainment industry in the United Kingdom. "Joe Mike Maserati" owned a little concert promotion company called Concerts South. Although he was a small-time player, he had some big contacts, and one of them was a guy named Keith Cheeseman, who supposedly had ties to the Manchester United Football Club.

After a series of conversations with Cheeseman, he conditionally agreed to put up the $2 million we needed to move our operations to the U.K. However, the final commitment would be based on our business plan and projected cash flow.

For several weeks Hiro and I worked on the five-year business plan that included everything from projected profit-and-loss analysis to how Hiro would train European wrestlers to be the backbone of Ring Warriors in the future. Part of the plan was for Hiro and I to move to London, where we would base our operations. We submitted the business plan to Cheeseman's attorney in London as instructed and waited.

It would be about a month before we heard anything, but when we did it was good news. Cheeseman had agreed to put up the money and instructed us to begin the paperwork. Everything was right on target — until we hit a snag. Cheeseman called and said some of his finances were tied up and his partners had other business to take care of. He said it would be a couple of months before they would be ready to sign a contract or any money could be transferred into our corporate operating account.

While Eurosport was being patient and even willing to wait another six months if that's what it took to get everything together, Hiro started getting edgy, and I wasn't much better. He began having trouble sleeping because he was so worried that everything we had worked toward was slipping away from us. He also knew he couldn't continue paying me a salary.

Hiro called a meeting at his house and asked me to bring Sharon along. It would be he and Judy and Sharon and I. Hiro was a man of honor, and it bothered him that circumstances beyond our control were playing with our destiny. Still, we were in it together, and with that he laid everything out regarding where we were financially. The reason he wanted us all there was because he felt, as I did, that we were all in it together. This meeting was much more than two business partners sitting down together; it was four friends deciding our future, and we all knew what we needed to do.

While Hiro and I were confident that the funding from Cheeseman would come through, it was time for desperate measures. We were well into June, and we agreed that July would be the last month the company could pay me or reimburse any of my expenses. We agreed that whatever funds we had in the bank would be used to pay for any editing still needed to be done to fulfill any of the contracts we had in place or for any travel or legal fees that might come about from getting the funding.

By August I took a two-week temporary job with a Fortune 500 company in the financial sector at less than one-third what I had been earning, where they had me working with Excel spreadsheets, compiling training data for their employees. The two-week assignment was extended to a month; then six weeks. By October, when the Cheeseman funding still hadn't secured, the company I was working for offered me a full-time position. Reluctantly I took it, but in the back of my mind I knew it would only be temporary as Hiro and I planned to move to London as soon as everything with Cheeseman was finalized. (I ended up working 11 and a half years for that company before being displaced in May 2009.)

While I was working my "temporary" job, another opportunity came our way. The Internet company that was maintaining the Ring Warriors website approached us about the prospect of partnering with them on some leading-edge technology — something called video streaming. They told us we could put our television show right on the World Wide Web and people could pay to watch it, like having a pay-per-view on a computer. Neither Hiro nor I knew much of the technology, so we relied heavily on our technology partners to guide us. Then we saw a story on CNN about a concert that was shown on some website that had more than 100,000 viewers. We started running calculations, and if we only charged five dollars a week, all we would need is 2,500 viewers to bring us $50,000 month.

We started questioning people about the technology, and I got my friend Sheldon Goldberg involved. Shelly was a bit more knowledgeable than me about Internet technologies at the time, and he told me that if we could overcome the herky-jerkiness that most experimental online videos had, we could be sitting on a

gold mine. When we brought that specific issue up to our Internet technology partners, they explained to us that the plug-in technology we would be using — VDOLive — was known for its broadcast quality and its ability to adapt to individual user connections. What they didn't tell us, however, was that the best quality that could be delivered on a 28.8 kilobyte per second connection (the fastest at that time) without downloading the file would be 8 to 12 frames per second (fps), while video runs at 30 fps. Unfortunately I was ignorant about this technology, and when they put a test video up on the Net for me to check it out, I downloaded both the viewer and the video file to my machine. When I watched it played perfectly. It took a while to download, but I was able to watch video right on my computer! Imagine that! I was so excited because all of a sudden we had new life without any investors at all.

So, with some very bad advice from our IT partners in tow and a lack of education on my part, we decided to create several one hour pay-per-view programs for the Internet and became the first company in the world to deliver actual wrestling matches online, light-years ahead of anyone else.

Because we would be targeting wrestling fans primarily in the U.S. who weren't familiar with the Ring Warriors brand, I convinced Hiro that in order to market our product to online fans, we needed to pair Gordon with someone who would have equal name recognition among that fan base. Although Hiro was reluctant to break up the Gordon Solie–Sir Oliver Humperdink tandem that had worked so well, he also knew that Hump's name would not draw the publicity we needed. And so, almost seven and a half years after I first envisioned them as a broadcast team for WWOW, Hiro let me put my dream team together, and we paired Gordon Solie with Bruno Sammartino. As for Hump, we put him into a very critical role as our online pitchman. In his new position, instead of providing color for Gordon, he would be conducting interviews during the shows, selling Ring Warrior merchandise during commercial breaks and reminding online viewers how to order the different episodes. Instead of being upset at the change, Hump welcomed it and was excited that we were trying something new.

After getting Bruno to come on board, we set the date and brought him down to Tampa to do voice-overs with Gordon. It was the first time Bruno got to meet Hiro, and amazingly it was the first time he and Gordon would ever meet, let alone work together. Although the first few matches they did together were a little rough, before the end of the first episode they were starting to gel nicely as they became more comfortable with each other. I later learned that each of them was a little intimidated.

We made history, and while it was the first time I got a chance to pair my dream team, it was also the last.

PHOTO BY HOWARD T. BRODY

The Ring Warriors dream team: Bruno Sammartino, Gordon Solie and Sir Oliver Humperdink

In trying to establish a following for our online show, of the seven episodes we produced specifically for the Internet, we provided the first three episodes free of charge and started charging with episode four. Each show was broken down into five or six segments for faster downloading and watching. By the third week, we were getting unreal numbers — something like 15,000 unique viewers — and we felt this was going to be an unequivocal success. But a funny thing happened on the way to the bank.

While tons of people were willing to watch Ring Warriors for free, they weren't willing to pay to watch the shows online. We got feedback from viewers telling us the picture was too small, the video was too slow or erratic or it took too much time to download. We learned that while they didn't mind putting up with technology flaws for free, they weren't willing to pay for them. When it came to paying customers, we didn't even crack the 200 mark. The pot at the end of the rainbow was empty, and the great online experiment of 1997 was a miserable failure that cost our company about $30,000. It effectively put World Superstars of Wrestling, Inc., out of business.

While we were making history in December 1997 by introducing video streaming, we finally heard from Keith Cheeseman after the first of the year who informed us the deal was still on and to finally send him the contract based on what we had verbally agreed to. In February 1998 we sent the contract off and we waited . . . and we waited . . . and we waited some more. It was always an excuse, and while

I think Hiro and I both knew what the eventual outcome would be, we didn't want to admit it. Every time we would ask Keith if the deal was dead, he'd say, "No!" So Hiro and I still believed it might come through, but it was wishful thinking.

By the end of 1998, while Gordon started losing his voice from what he thought was a prolonged flu, Hiro was starting to feel ill. In early 1999 Hiro learned he had cancer but didn't tell me right away. I had lost my mother in February, and he didn't want to upset me. It was actually his wife Judy who called me to tell me what was wrong with my partner and why he had been avoiding me.

While Hiro had a lot of anxiety and anger over the deal constantly being delayed, once he took sick business no longer mattered to him. It took a back seat to his family, and rightfully so. But in so many ways, Hiro wanted his final dream to come true. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

More than a year had passed, and finally Keith just seemed to have simply vanished. Joe Mike who had a European concert series pending with him couldn't reach him. When I contacted his law firm, they told me that they were no longer representing him and gave me a new phone and fax number. Despite numerous attempts, neither Joe Mike nor I ever got any return correspondence from him. Hiro and I couldn't understand why Keith would string us along like that. It made no sense. Hiro taking ill and the deal with Keith Cheeseman falling apart marked the end of Ring Warriors.

Over the years I often wondered what happened to Keith Cheeseman and why he simply disappeared. In 2006 I finally found out.

Cheeseman was never associated with Manchester United as he claimed but was the owner of a team called the Dunstable Town Blues Football Club during the mid-'70s. As one former player claimed, he was a chairman whose idea of cash flow was infrequent trips from his overseas home hoarding a briefcase stuffed with cash. Cheeseman's tenure as Dunstable's owner was abruptly ended when Interpol got wise to the fact that his money had come from fraudulent loans.

It seemed Keith was a master of manipulation who specialized in gaining the trust of well-placed employees in financial institutions and getting them to carry out his dirty work. In 1997 he met a woman named Elaine in a London bar. They eventually developed a relationship, and before long he was telling her of his financial troubles. Because he needed money, Elaine was all too willing to help and told Keith she had access to the account details of some of her bank's wealthiest clients. Unfortunately for Keith, his new love interest could not directly access the accounts, but they circumvented this by creating mirror accounts on the bank's system by inputting every single detail of the wealthy account holder. At an agreed time they would swap the real accounts with the mirror accounts and, therefore,

have direct access to the money. Aware of Cheeseman's previous activities, the police were watching him, and it didn't take long for them to link Keith and Elaine. When the police showed up to arrest them, Elaine's bags were already packed for her flight to where she believed she would be starting a new life.

The question of why he never returned the call was finally answered: he was in jail. Unfortunately none of that helped Hiro in his battle for his life.

Although Hiro was determined to fight the cancer that was now consuming his body, he asked me to help him clean up some loose ends by liquidating all the Ring Warriors merchandise we had, so I did.

The months passed, and in that time I saw my friend and former business partner deteriorate before my eyes. In early November, when Tony Magliaro (a.k.a. Tony Rumble) passed away, Hiro told me during a telephone conversation, "They're dropping like flies." Little did he know that he would be next.

On Friday, November 26th, the day after Thanksgiving, I got a call from Judy Kojima telling me that Hiro had taken a turn for the worse and that it was time to come to the house to say goodbye.

I didn't want to go, but knew I had to. Hiro's family was gathered in the living room when I arrived, and Judy allowed me private time with Hiro. When I walked into his bedroom, I did everything I could to keep myself together. He was a mere shell of the man I knew. Because they had stopped feeding him intravenously, he literally looked like a skeleton. His eyes were closed, his mouth was open and he was breathing erratically, gasping with each breath. I do not think he was aware I was even there.

Fighting back tears, I poured my heart out and thanked him for everything he ever did for me and taught me and for believing in me when perhaps sometimes I didn't always believe in myself. I promised Hiro that whatever I did in the wrestling business or in life I would do it with the honor, integrity and humility that he often showed me. I then bent over his frail body and kissed him on the forehead, said goodbye, took a step back from the bed and bowed to him in the traditional Japanese manner to show him respect. Standing up straight, I left his bedroom and never looked back.

On Saturday morning, two weeks to the day that Tony Rumble had died, Judy called me a little after 9:00 to tell me Hiro had passed the night before with his family at his side. I thanked her, hung up the phone and cried. I kept picturing the way he had looked when I last saw him, and I didn't want to remember him that way. I wanted to remember the Hiro who was full of life and loved the wrestling business as much as I did.

First I remembered the night he called me when WCW *Nitro* debuted and Lex

Luger came out to challenge Hulk Hogan. "What are my two boys doing out there?" he said to me in a humorous manner, proud that his students were the center of attention. "I taught them better than that!"

I remembered him telling me how he broke Hogan's leg to discourage him from getting into the wrestling business. When he came back after his leg healed, Hiro knew that Hogan had the heart to be a pro wrestler. Then I remembered him telling me about how Luger was the only one, of all the students he ever trained, who was able to keep up with him during an endurance workout.

Visions of our times together in France flashed before me.

Hiro prided himself on being a quick study and always tried to speak French when he could, especially words or phrases when ordering dinner, because they were usually the easiest to remember. So, one night while trying to order fish, instead of ordering *poisson*, Hiro ordered *passion*, to which the French waitress went wide-eyed and said very sternly to him, "No, no, no!" waving her finger in a back-and-forth motion. "No passion! Poisson!" When she took his menu and walked away, Hiro looked at me wondering what he had done or said that she was so quick to correct him. I told him that I think he just ordered a little passionate love making. He blushed with embarrassment and together we had a great laugh.

Then there was this other time in Cannes, when we were walking out of the Palais for lunch and we heard a voice, "Hiro! Hiro!" We turned around and it was none other than Ole Anderson, who had accompanied his then wife Sharon Sidello to MIPCOM. Hiro introduced me to Ole, and when Ole asked how I got in the business, I told him. Being the gruff son-of-a-bitch he could be, he began to lay into me, calling me things like a mark and how back in the day people like me would never be allowed in the business and all this other crap. I knew better than to try to disrespect him, so I didn't answer back except to say he had a right to his opinion and things change. Hiro didn't say a word, except to accept a dinner invitation when Ole suggested that Hiro meet him and Sharon for dinner that night. When Ole finally walked away, Hiro got pissed.

"Who does he think he is? You are my partner. How dare he talk to you like that!"

"Don't worry about it," I said, shrugging it off. "He's got a chip on his shoulder, it's only talk. It doesn't mean anything."

"No," Hiro corrected me. "What he did was wrong and tonight I will teach him a lesson. Tonight, you're gonna watch *me* work a program."

True to his word, at dinner, Hiro lit Ole up by embarrassing him in front of his wife. He brought up business and personal mistakes Ole had made over the years, and I just sat there loving every second of it. Then Hiro then brought up Brian

Rogowski (a.k.a. Bryant Anderson), Ole's son, asking him why he never signed his boy to a WCW contract when he was able to like he had done for other wrestlers he liked. When Ole said it was "the beer talking," Hiro, said, "No, not the beer. Of all people, you should know better to take care of your family first."

Hiro sipped his beer and then looked right into Ole's eyes. "Boy, you really are one dumb Pollock!"

Ole just stared at Hiro, stunned, and didn't do a damn thing.

After dinner as we walked back to our hotel, I could see a slight grin run across Hiro's face.

"You enjoyed yourself back there, didn't you?"

Hiro got a bit serious. "Anybody who disrespects you is disrespecting me," he said. "It's one thing if I criticize you because if I do it, you know it's for business. What he said today was a personal attack and that is not right. He doesn't know who you are or how hard you've fought to get here." Hiro then got real quiet. All of a sudden I saw the grin return to his face. "Yeah, that was enjoyable."

It was those times and those instances, little snapshots of his life, that made him my friend.

At his funeral, Judy asked me to say a few words and when I got up on the pulpit, among his friends and family, I saw a sea of familiar faces — Hulk Hogan, Jimmy Hart, Hercules Hernandez, Dory Funk Jr., Don Curtis, Dick Slater, Haku, Jack Brisco, Brian Blair, Steve Keirn and Gordon Solie, who himself was having health issues. There was even a contingency from Japan that included his friends Saito, Hattori and Osamu Nishimura, who was one of Hiro's last students. Next to speaking at my mother's funeral the previous February, saying a few words at Hiro's service was perhaps the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

To this day, when I think about the man, I think about the many, many life lessons he taught me, with perhaps the most significant lesson being that while it's okay to pursue a dream, the most important thing is the journey and not necessarily the destination.

The second most important lesson Hiro taught me is never put business in front of family and always try to keep them separate.

What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.

— Pericles (c. 495–429 BCE)

THIRTEEN

KING OF THE CARNIES

MIKE LANO

Dennis poses with NWA champs Lou Thesz, Jack Brisco and Dan Severn

It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious.
— Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

The day I climbed into a World Wrestling Federation ring with the late Dennis Coralluzzo, it forever linked our names in wrestling history.

Those who knew Dennis, whether they're a wrestler, business associate or friend, will probably say he was the most colorful individual they ever met. Many different words have been used to describe Coralluzzo over the years, and they range from good to, well, bad. But he has never been given credit for his many accomplishments.

My first true experience with Dennis's quirkiness was in 1995, when he, Steve Rickard, Bob Trobich and I met in Orlando for the annual NWA meeting. In the middle of a heated discussion about finances, or lack thereof, Dennis took off the ball cap he was wearing, placed it on the floor, took out a deck of cards from his pocket and began pitching the cards into the hat. It was his way of saying: "I'm bored. Let me know when we're going to talk about wrestling."

That was the late Mr. Dennis Coralluzzo. Regardless of how he conducted his business or what people said or thought of him, wrestling itself was his true passion.

The year before I joined the NWA, at the annual meeting in Las Vegas, while Rickard, Trobich, Paul Heyman and Jim Crockett Jr. were walking around in business suits, Dennis wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Free Mike Tyson" (the former world boxing champion was serving time on a rape charge in Indiana). During the subsequent business meeting in Rickard's room, without any explanation, Dennis laid down flat on the floor — leaving those who didn't know he had chronic back problems wondering, "What is this guy doing?"

Over the years a lot of people have asked that same question: how did a guy who had that much moxie and with what might be considered adult attention deficit disorder get into the wrestling business and become an influential figure?

Dennis was born on March 3, 1953, in Camden, New Jersey, the same hometown as legendary NWA World Champion "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers, a wrestler who also walked to the beat of his own drum. He received an Associate Arts degree in business from Gloucester Community College in Sewell, New Jersey, and not long after took a sales position in the insurance industry.

Over 20 plus years, Dennis built a reputation as an award-winning earner for Prudential Insurance Company, writing more than a million dollars a year worth of business and being touted as one of its top salespeople nationwide. He was so good, at the urging of his superiors, he began teaching others how to sell insurance. Dennis was a pillar of the community, living in a large, beautiful home in an upscale neighborhood with his wife and three children; he was active in civic organizations and sponsored youth sports teams.

But then, like so many others, Dennis caught the wrestling bug, and from that point forward there were two Dennis Coralluzzos: one was an adult no-nonsense businessman who rarely uttered a vulgarity; the other was a twisted version of Tom Hanks's character in *Big* who spewed profanity with zest.

Perhaps Dennis's longtime friend Jim Cornette described him best: "Dennis was like the comedy version of Tony Soprano — without the killings or organized crime."

Dennis began his career in pro wrestling as a photographer, shooting pictures at

Joel Goodhart's Tri-State Wrestling Alliance shows. In time he befriended some of the wrestlers, and when he couldn't break in on the promotional side with Goodhart, he began helping Don "D.C." Drake with his National Wrestling Federation shows in Camden out of an old Sears and Roebuck store. When he wanted to have more than just a passive role in promoting, Dennis eventually got involved with Larry Sharpe, who owned a professional wrestling school in Bellmawr, New Jersey, called the Monster Factory. Over the years, the Monster Factory received a ton of publicity for producing a number of big names in the pro wrestling industry, like Tony Atlas, Bam Bam Bigelow, King Kong Bundy, Raven, D'Lo Brown, Chris Candido and Tammy. It was Dennis's idea to send Bigelow to Memphis to work a program with Jerry "The King" Lawler.

Becoming one of Sharpe's backers, Dennis started promoting shows under the Monster Factory name at the National Guard Armory in Woodbury, New Jersey, and it was at those shows that he really got to know many of the school's students. Because Dennis gained a reputation early on for taking care of the wrestlers, when he decided to give it a go on his own, he had no trouble getting wrestlers to work for him.

In early 1986 Dennis was introduced to Jim Cornette by Frank Chille, who did publicity in the Philadelphia area, and the two forged a lifelong friendship. A few years later Dennis began making inroads with WCW. It started when WCW did a show at the Civic Center in Philadelphia and by chance needed a 35-mm camera. Dennis was there and offered up his under the condition that every time they came to town he would get a backstage pass. They agreed. Once his foot was in the door, he used a little ingenuity to get others backstage too. Dennis would take the backstage pass that WCW gave him, take it out of its plastic sleeve and go to a printer that had a color copier. Nobody ever questioned whether they were legit.

It was during those backstage visits that Dennis first met Bob Trobich and inquired about joining the NWA. WCW, which was being run by Jim Herd and being booked by Bill Watts at the time, attempted to block Dennis from joining the organization. They wanted complete control of the brand, and a wild card like Dennis presented a real risk.

Even as Herd and Watts continued to keep Dennis at bay, Trobich stepped in and told them that they might be violating the 1956 consent decree and that Dennis could conceivably either engage the U.S. Department of Justice or sue the organization or both. (The consent decree was the result of an extensive investigation by the Department of Justice into the then business practices of the organization, which included claims that the NWA was an illegal monopoly that was blackballing wrestlers and blocking competition.)

Although Trobich thought legal action was highly unlikely, he exaggerated the threat to WCW because he didn't want voting rights in the organization diluted. Even though Dennis had a mixed reputation, Trobich knew he could never fully count on WCW to do the right thing. It was best, he thought, to have more members — people like Dennis gave the NWA another "little guy" vote.

While that was playing out, Dennis found himself in an on-camera role in the USWA. He played an attorney from the Coralluzzo Collection Agency who was trying to collect money from Jerry Lawler, claiming Fred "The Elephant Boy" Schreiber and his brother were the King's illegitimate children. As the Elephant Boy, Fred was a fixture on the Howard Stern Show and was best known for his severe speech impediment and his on-air tales of sexual experimentation. The angle worked so well that Dennis ended up in a match himself, where he was pinned at the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis.

People who were close with him during this time believe it was while on one of his trips to Memphis that he learned the darker side of the promotional business from Tennessee's ultimate con man, Ronnie P. Gossett.

Although he started his career as a ring announcer in the Memphis territory at age 14, Gossett gained notoriety as a behind-the-scenes "fix it" guy for promoter Nick Gulas. He later became the lead heel manager after both Cornette and Jimmy Hart left the territory. But Gossett loved gambling as much as wrestling and often found himself in the hole, looking for ways to feed his habit. While he claimed to be the biggest bookie in Chattanooga, he often borrowed money from promoters and wrestlers saying he was waiting on a big payoff from one of the losers, but all too often he never paid his debts. Gossett was accused by some of the wrestlers of committing check fraud, although he was never arrested or officially charged with the crime. Gossett was arrested and did jail time, however, for selling Gulas's territory out from under him in the '70s.

Gossett allegedly gave Dennis a crash course in the art of the check scam, complete with how to open a business account using a shadow company, how to make counterfeit checks with an embossing machine and how to dump the account without drawing suspicion after withdrawing the funds. (Fortunately, during the time I knew Dennis I never witnessed anything like this first hand — although I had my suspicions.)

Returning from Memphis, Dennis finally had the NWA membership he coveted and began running shows under the National Wrestling Alliance banner. He was also starting to work with Eastern Championship Wrestling's Tod Gordon. They actually worked together for a couple of years, with Dennis running shows on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River and Tod running shows on the Philadelphia

side. On January 23, 1993, they even ran a joint show at the Philadelphia Airport Radisson.

The relationship between Dennis and Tod didn't start to deteriorate until Eastern started to gain popularity. This bothered Dennis, and for a good reason. Initially it was Dennis who began breaking new ground in the area by booking the likes of Chris Benoit, Terry Funk, Sabu and others, all of who would ultimately be associated with ECW. Despite being slighted by local fans, Dennis continued booking talent like Lawler, Sean Waltman, Stan Hansen and others.

Crockett, meanwhile, wound up back in the NWA, but his tenure was short-lived. His non-compete agreement with Ted Turner, who purchased WCW from him in 1988, was up, and he wanted to start promoting again. His effort to launch the World Wrestling Network failed, following a New York television taping and attempted talent exchange with Tod Gordon and Paul Heyman. Because Eastern was then the only NWA member with television, they booked a world title tournament for August to fill the hole left by Ric Flair, who had been stripped of the title following WCW's departure, with Shane Douglas slated to win and take the title. Dennis didn't like the idea, feeling Tod and Paul would monopolize the title much like Crockett had done in the 1980s; he wanted to have the tournament at one of his shows, with Benoit getting the strap. So he tried to block them, thinking Tod and Paul might try something underhanded.

Bob Trobich had to step forward to quash Dennis's paranoia. After being reassured by both Tod and Paul that everything was on the up and up, Bob assured Dennis by vouching for the ECW duo that he was just being paranoid. But Dennis wasn't satisfied and contacted Rickard in New Zealand who called Bob, asking if there was any concern. Even after Bob put his reputation on the line, Dennis didn't let the issue go and he went to the newsletters and spoke poorly of Douglas on the radio. Tod felt Dennis was trying to play them, and as a result he and Paul used the tournament to unleash their new "Extreme" brand.

Even as the screw job occurred, Bob thought it was more of a "screw you" to Crockett because he and Paul didn't part well after the WWN project. When Dennis called Bob the next morning to tell him what had happened, Bob called Tod looking for an explanation.

"What the hell happened?" Bob asked.

"We needed to get over with the fans," Tod responded, trying to sell it as an angle.

But Trobich wasn't buying it, saying that if it was an angle, "Why didn't anyone else know about it?"

Of course it wasn't an angle. At that point I was still navigating between the

NWA and ECW. Years later Dennis would apparently laugh about the double cross, admitting to Donald Bucci (a.k.a. Donnie B), "Man, Paul E. got me!" But despite the screw job, Dennis kept on going and became the NWA's premier cheerleader. Until I became president in 1996, it was Dennis's National Wrestling Alliance — to do with what he pleased.

When Dennis started accompanying Dan "The Beast" Severn to the Octagon holding up the NWA belt, well . . . the NWA hadn't had that type of exposure in years. When others failed to notice it was frustrating — for him and for me. We had a legitimate badass as our champion and somehow it was one of the best kept secrets in wrestling. Fans who read the *Observer* knew about it, but in 1994 the "smart" fans were still a very limited and select audience.

In late 1995 Dennis came up with an idea to generate more interest. He cut a deal with Tommy Gilbert — who earlier that year had lost his son Tommy Jr. ("Hot Stuff" Eddie Gilbert) from a reported cocaine- and steroid-induced heart attack, although Tommy claimed that injuries to his chest and heart muscle from a serious car accident in 1983 could have been a factor — for an Eddie Gilbert Memorial show, with all profits going to the Gilbert family. Some who knew Dennis raised an eyebrow, but when it came to the boys, and especially the Gilberts, Dennis just wouldn't pull any shenanigans.

Despite all the questions about his integrity, one-time associate Fred Rubenstein put it best: "Just when you were determined to hate him, he would redeem himself with a magnanimous gesture."

The first Eddie Gilbert Memorial show drew a respectable crowd of about 500 fans and generated a lot of attention, which had a positive effect at the gate for Coralluzzo's subsequent show. But it still wasn't the shot in the arm the NWA needed.

At the 1996 NWA annual meeting in Tampa, it was once again Dennis, Bob, Steve Rickard and me. Rickard held proxies for his son and the O'Days out of Australia and Dennis held the proxy for Victor Quinones, who had joined the year prior. The four of us were sitting in the lobby of the Westshore Marriot, and it was decision time. Collectively we knew the NWA was ready to take its last breath. It was more of a "who are we kidding?" discussion. We knew that without television exposure, we might as well just put a bullet in the old horse. The organization owed Bob Trobich's law firm and Bob himself tens of thousands of dollars; we had no membership to speak of; I was more active with Ring Warriors; Steve wasn't running New Zealand and only ran one tour a year to India, Singapore or Malaysia; his son didn't run shows in Hawaii; the O'Days weren't running shows in Australia and Victor was doing one or two shows in Japan, not really even pushing the NWA

COURTESY KATHIE FITZPATRICK

An emotional Dennis Coralluzzo with Tommy Gilbert

brand. So aside from Dennis's Jersey shows, the brand didn't even have a grassroots following.

Then an idea flashed across my brain. "Unless we do something drastic," I said, "I suggest we end this now . . ."

That was not a very popular thing to say, and while I could see disappointment stream across everyone's face, especially Dennis's, they all agreed.

Steve, who had been president for the last year and was the only holdover from the original membership, leaned in and asked in his very thick, deep and sometimes hard to understand accent, "Wuhl, 'oward, wha d'ya s'gest?"

Based in New Zealand, I felt Steve was an ineffective president who didn't have his hand on the pulse of the business. Perhaps he knew what made things tick in India or Pakistan, but when it came to the U.S. he didn't have a clue.

"Give me a year," I said. "Let me see what I can do."

While Dennis should have been the next president, based on tenure, he admitted to me that he didn't have the patience for the job. And when I asked for their vote of confidence, they gave it to me.

And just like that I was president of the National Wrestling Alliance.

My first order of business — right on the spot — was to change the corporate structure of the NWA to enable it and its members to legally make money. As a non-profit organization, members of the NWA could not legally share any of the income they might potentially generate. We agreed to fold the non-profit Iowa corporation we operated under and set up a limited liability corporation based in North Carolina. (Because Trobich, our corporate counselor and treasurer, lived in Charlotte, it would be the easiest from an administrative perspective.) We promptly transferred all rights and assets, including the brand and logo, to a new corporation — Pro Wrestling Organization, LLC.

My second order of business was to eliminate the organization's debt. Bob

stepped forward and selflessly agreed to wipe the slate clean of everything owed to him and the law firm he worked for.

Then Dennis did what he often did best, he challenged me. He asked if Hiro and I would consider making Ring Warriors an NWA show. I would have loved to have said "yes" on the spot, but I couldn't. Instead I told him I would talk to Hiro, and I did, later that day. Hiro agreed that if we got TV in the States, which we still planned to do, he would give the NWA the coverage it needed. While Dennis and Steve were happy with the promise, to prove he was serious about the commitment, Hiro allowed me to show a couple of historic NWA matches on Ring Warriors, including the 1960 title match from Chicago between Pat O'Connor and Buddy Rogers.

I quickly began concentrating on the business of the organization. Dennis continued to call the shots on the wrestling side since he was the only one regularly promoting under the NWA banner. At that point I was doing one paid show a year in Gainesville, Florida, at the Alachua County Fair. Dennis used to challenge me to do more, but I didn't want to take the risk — mainly because I couldn't afford to. While Dennis used to bust my hump about the fact that I had a huge territory that included the Caribbean and New York, deep down he knew what I was up against, and he wasn't malicious about it.

Just prior to the 1997 Eddie Gilbert Memorial show, Dennis asked me what I thought about moving the belt from Severn to Dory Funk Jr. for six months, as a way to help both of us and get the NWA some press. Dennis knew I had the late fall gig in Gainesville, and doing the switch in April at his show would enable me to do the switch back in early November. I loved the idea since Dory was based in Florida and I had gotten pretty close with him and his wife Marti. It would also give Dennis a fresh face to promote for six months as Dan's drawing power was starting to dwindle. So, with no objections on my part, the NWA title was all set to switch from Dan to Dory.

On the Sunday morning following the show I got a call from Dennis telling me that Dan had refused to put Dory over. Although Dennis was usually fairly calm when talking to me, he was pretty hot. He felt doing a double count out finish because Dory wouldn't put Dan over clean after Dan had refused to put him over was going to hurt his promotion — especially since they drew about 1,000 fans. Dennis asked me to speak with Dan. I also knew I had talk to the Funks — and before I had a chance to call them, Marti called me.

To say they were upset was an understatement. Dory felt foolish because he had made arrangements for members of the Japanese press to be there. The idea the Funks had was to bring the title rematch to Japan where both Dory and Dan could

get a huge payday, and they felt Dan had killed the idea and blamed Dennis for not having control of his champion. While Dory and Marti tried to convince me to get the strap off Dan as soon as possible, I wanted to find out what had gone wrong. The one thing Dory and Marti made clear was they would never work with Dan again.

Dan and I had grown close since we met at the first Eddie Gilbert Memorial Show. While he liked Dennis, he confided he never knew when Dennis was being honest and said he preferred working with me. When I spoke to him on Monday morning, Dan said he would have no problem putting Dory over — if the situation was right — but he didn't like the fact that while he had spoken to Dennis at least 20 times before the show, the first time he had heard about the title switch was when Dory came up to him in the dressing room and told him about it. Dan told me that while he had all the respect in the world for Dory, he wasn't going to put over "an old man" without some kind of discussion about it. He also didn't like that when he went to Dennis all he got was "Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you."

When I called Dennis back and relayed everything to him, I could hear he felt like he had screwed up. But it wasn't that simple. While I understood Dan's feelings, he shouldn't have flexed his muscle. Sometimes you just have to go with the flow, and not putting Dory over sent the wrong message. Any other promoter would probably have stripped Dan of the title that night, but Dennis liked and respected Dan. So rather than defend himself, Dennis took the blame and admitted to not thinking everything through. When he asked for my advice, I told him to just let everything sit until it straightened itself out. But I told him that if he wanted to move the belt off of Dan, I would back whatever decision he made. Dennis chose to leave the title on Dan, saying "Maybe its better this way." And while Dennis took it in stride, in October, I would use the legitimate Severn-Funk heat to my own advantage.

This is an example of what set Dennis apart from many others. While some of his competitors and former partners say he ripped off talent, I think that's sour grapes. Dennis was passionate about the guys he booked. He loved nothing more than seeing his workers succeed by making it to the WWF or WCW. Dennis put the wrestlers first, and that's why they were loyal to him. As one former associate put it, "Dennis took hits too. He'd often have too many matches and not enough of a draw, but he always gave a payoff and the boys never felt he took the money and ran — whether he gave you $10 or a hamburger."

It was a high for Dennis when one of his guys made it; and if he felt he did wrong by a worker, he would look for a way to make things right.

When Dennis and I got the call to do *Raw*, part of the deal was we had to award

the NWA North American title to Jeff Jarrett. Driving from Hartford to New York after the show, instead of being excited, Dennis was more concerned about how he'd unintentionally screwed Tom Carter, the actual NWA North American title-holder

"The guy has been so loyal to me," Dennis said. "It's not fair."

By the time we got to the hotel, we'd come up with a solution: Carter would get the NWA National Heavyweight title.

"He loved the boys," Cornette explained. "He was always pushing to get them WWF bookings. While maybe he might take advantage of a sponsor or a building, he wouldn't fuck the boys."

I remember how upset he was when he thought the Gilbert family was accusing him of shorting them on the '99 Eddie Gilbert Memorial Show. "It breaks my heart to think they feel like that," he said. "After everything I've done for them. How can they think that? You and I both know I'm no saint, Howard, but I swear on my children I gave them everything."

I found out many years later that aside from the money Dennis gave the family, Tommy and his wife got paid to attend the show, which must have made the accusation doubly tough. The Gilberts and Dennis did not stay at odds for long, however, because when Dennis got booted out of the NWA, Doug Gilbert resigned his membership in a show of support.

The two times I heard talent butt heads with Dennis was when Ahmed Johnson (Tony Norris) and Abdullah the Butcher (Larry Shreve) both wronged him, and he needed to save face with both his fans and his locker room.

Ahmed Johnson was staying at a local hotel when Fred Rubenstein, doing a favor for Dennis, went to pick him up. Johnson refused to get in and demanded a limousine. When Fred said they didn't have a limo, Johnson told Fred to take a message back to the promoter that before he would come to the show, he wanted more money and a limo. When Dennis heard this, he not only got pissed, he got even. During the show Dennis gave out the telephone number to the hotel several times and encouraged the fans to call all night to wake up the prima donna. While Ahmed was said to have been livid, the fans seemed to enjoy it.

Abdullah, on the other hand, no-showed an event. When Dennis found out that he cashed in his plane ticket, he went into the ring and buried him with the fans, ripping him mercilessly. Dennis gave out Abby's home phone number too and told the fans to call him — "Because *he* fucked you!"

Dennis didn't seem to mind controversy, and if he did, he never showed it. In all the time I knew him, he would shake off any stink that tried to attach itself with what can only be described as a deep, Herman Munster–like, belly laugh.

In one of the most humorous stories I ever heard about Coralluzzo, he was pitching a show to a parochial school in Vineland, New Jersey. After the school agreed to do the show and signed the contract, the monsignor asked Dennis, "How much do you think we can make?"

Dennis, who had a knack for theatrics, put his arm around the clergyman and said, "Father, don't worry! We're gonna make a fuckload of money."

And they did.

Most of Dennis' controversies within the industry, however, were perhaps born out of his obsession with ECW.

When ECW began broadcasting and running shows outside of Viking Hall using many of the wrestlers who first worked for Dennis, he got ticked off and started sending ECW tapes to buildings they planned to run. Some of the buildings actually canceled the live events due to the content, and ECW workers became furious, believing Dennis cost them a payday. Even Mick Foley, who was known as pretty even-tempered, called Dennis one night and allegedly berated him for taking food out of his mouth. Next time, he said, he'd pay him a personal visit.

But Dennis wouldn't stop.

Whether it was ripping down ECW posters, calling the Philadelphia fire marshal to complain about crowds or dropping flyers from the highway onto the ECW parking lot, Dennis and his cohorts tried to make life miserable for Tod Gordon and Paul Heyman. According to Tod, one night Dennis and Gino Moore were found in the ECW parking lot unscrewing the valves on people's tires, but rather than having them arrested, they were given a warning. Moore denies this ever happening.

Over the years Tod has claimed, "If he [Dennis] would've put half the energy into his own company that he put into trying to screw ours, he might have actually been successful."

When Chris Candido called Jim Cornette one night on behalf of Paul, asking him to come to the ECW Arena on their next Saturday night show because they needed a surprise, Jim told Chris he wasn't interested. But when Chris played the "do it for me" card, Jim said he would on one condition, which he believed Paul would never agree to. Because Jim hated how Paul had embarrassed Dennis by trashing the NWA title, the stipulation was that Paul had to shake hands with Dennis at the ECW Arena — and apologize. He didn't even want a payoff, just the apology. Shockingly, Paul agreed.

Even though Cornette thought ECW did more harm than good to the wrestling business, he went for the one-shot deal because he thought it would benefit Dennis. But he warned Paul not to pull any bullshit.

On the night of the show Heyman instructed Chris to send a limo to Stamford,

Connecticut, to pick up Cornette. Jimmy was planning to drive to Philly, so he suspected he was being buttered up for some kind of screwing. Before making his way to the arena, however, the driver took him to Morton's steakhouse, where he met Dennis, and the two had dinner compliments of ECW.

"We ate like we were going to the chair," Jim recalled. "We ate until we couldn't eat anymore. Dennis even grabbed a cigar and put four more into his jacket pocket. The bill was about $600."

When they got to the building, Paul got into the limo with them and just like he promised, he extended his hand to Dennis and apologized, telling him all was forgotten.

"Let bygones be bygones," Paul said. "Let's see if we can work together."

Because Cornette's appearance was supposed to be a surprise, Paul told him to stay in the limo — someone would come get him when it was time for his spot. Paul told Dennis to stay as well, saying that because of all the bad blood it wasn't wise for him to appear until he was able to tell the boys they had patched things up. Dennis agreed.

So, while James E. Cornette was hustled into the ring in one of the biggest surprises in ECW history, Dennis Coralluzzo was sitting idly in a limo, smoking a cigar courtesy of Paul Heyman.

By the time Cornette finished his promo, he was "knee-deep in garbage." He ran to the limo as fast as he could because, as he put it, the building scared him. Right before he got into the car Paul jammed an envelope in his hand, and as soon as the limo door closed he and Dennis were whisked away. When he opened the envelope inside was $750 — a little bonus.

Within a day or two, as Dennis got the word out that he'd buried the hatchet with Paul Heyman, Paul began backpedaling, claiming Dennis broke the deal. Dennis didn't know what Paul was talking about because it was Paul who didn't keep his word. Paul never held a meeting with the wrestlers to let them know fences were mended, as he was supposed to.

When Candido called Cornette several weeks later to ask him about working an ECW show in Asbury Park, New Jersey, Jimmy told Chris he would have but added, "Paul didn't give me the *one thing* I really asked for."

Once again Dennis was screwed by Paul — and any hope he had of an ECW versus NWA angle to help his attendance were gone . . . until 1998.

A few months after Dennis and I appeared on *Raw*, Dennis worked out a deal with Tod Gordon. Tod would lead a group of ex-ECWers, like Stevie Richards, the Public Enemy and the Pitbulls, in a battle with Dennis's NWA faction. Although it's unclear who approached who — Marc Coralluzzo says Tod floated the idea by

them while Tod claims he was approached by someone who worked for Dennis — the angle was beginning to work, with Dennis's attendance picking up. It was costing Dennis a small fortune to maintain the angle, however, and he didn't know if he could keep up with the payroll demands. Tod, who had left ECW in 1997 and really didn't want to do the deal, gave Dennis a crazy dollar figure, thinking there would be no way Dennis would go for it. But Tod was shocked when his $1,500 quote was met. Tod claims that because he didn't trust Dennis for that first show, he got paid in advance in the parking lot.

The angle would come to an abrupt end on the night of the NWA's 50th anniversary show in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in October 1998, when team Coralluzzo was to face team Gordon in a war games–like cage match that would include Doug Gilbert, Missy Hyatt, Steve Corino and others. Dennis and Tod worked out an arrangement ahead of time on the finish of the match. The NWA team would lose, setting up the main event for a big show Dennis would be holding the following month. During the afternoon booking meeting in which Jimmy, Dennis, Donnie B. and I were going over the card, Dennis started complaining about how much money it was costing him each month to continue the angle, and after he explained the finish, Cornette's head exploded. Jimmy asked Dennis point blank if he wanted to keep the angle with Tod going, and when he said "No," Cornette and Donnie came up with an alternate finish that Dennis liked; it would essentially blow off the angle and team NWA would be victorious. When Dennis and Jimmy told Tod of the change in the dressing room before the show, Tod packed his things and left the building. I don't know if the fans missed Tod or not in that final match, and it really didn't matter. After all it was professional wrestling, where reality is suspended and changed all the time. As long as the wrestlers delivered a good match that sent the fans home happy, it was mission accomplished.

While the outward appearance of the NWA 50th anniversary weekend was a huge success among fans and the newest members of the organization, in many ways the weekend was a disaster. It's definitely what started the friction between Dennis and I. Although I had heard accusations about him from others, before the weekend was up I would witness and learn firsthand about his waywardness.

The idea for the NWA 50th came in March and was solely Dennis's brainchild. With all the new members who were joining the organization, it was to be a one-time event that would include matches featuring all of the NWA champions, the top wrestler from each territory and select independent and WWF talent. The idea would be that everyone would contribute and the profit would go to the organization. Dennis and I would work on much of it together.

A few weeks later, Dennis called me in a panic; he needed a thousand dollars

sent overnight for the building otherwise we'd lose it. Without questioning his motives I instructed Bob Trobich to send him the money for the building. Imagine our shock when after the show, while Bob and I were settling up with the facility, we learned they had never gotten a deposit from Dennis.

We started to uncover a lot of other things that didn't add up. It seemed we were drastically short on the gate receipts and Polaroid money from the afternoon fan fair. When we questioned Dennis, he danced around the issue and then received what could only be described as a perfectly timed call from home. There was an emergency, and he and Marc had to leave immediately. Bob and I wound up working through much of the night trying to figure out what had happened, and even then we didn't flush everything out. It would be weeks before it was clear Dennis owed the organization a few thousand dollars — that we could prove. We knew he took more but didn't have the paper trail.

Although there has been much finger pointing and accusations over the years, the only things we could bill Dennis for were items like the NWA anniversary T-shirts, the video rights to the show that Dennis received a thousand dollar advance for from Rob Feinstein at RF Video and the difference between the income and ticket receipts. In all, Dennis agreed to pay back a little more than $4,000.

But the thing that really started my fallout with Dennis and Marc actually had nothing to do with money. It was all, instead, about the Coralluzzos' penchant for practical jokes.

Now I don't know if the Coralluzzo duo targeted me because Dennis felt I was coming into his territory and playing the big shot or if he thought I was just being too stuffy or serious in the role I had as NWA president. Whatever it was, I wasn't laughing.

Bob and I had a stressful Friday. We were pulled out of the annual meeting for a few hours when we learned the City of Cherry Hill had padlocked the ballroom and was going to shut down the show because Dennis hadn't gotten a permit. I was not in a jovial mood. I just wanted to get through the long day as we had the fan convention in the morning, the Cauliflower Alley banquet in the late afternoon and the big anniversary show that night.

When I got on the hotel elevator I saw these business cards with my name on them. Not an NWA business card mind you, but a disparaging business card with a drawing of an African-American mannequin head, the kind you would perhaps find on a hairstylist's business card, along with the title "Major Shit Stirrer" or something like that. But the thing that bothered me most was that it had my phone number on it . . . my real home phone number.

While I can look back and see how funny it was, I was not laughing at the time.

I was so pissed I started grabbing the cards out of the elevator and wherever else I saw them: the hotel restaurant, the bar, the lobby, on tables. I looked for Dennis to find out who would do such a disrespectful thing to me.

As I walked into the area where the fan festival was being held, I saw Dennis across the room talking with Dave Scherer of 1wrestling.com and a few other people. Dennis had his back to me, and as I came up on him I heard him say, ". . . yeah we made these cards. Aren't they great?"

"You did these?" I asked.

Dennis turned around quickly. "What?"

"Why the fuck would you do something like this?"

Dennis tried playing dumb. "What are you talking about?"

"Why the fuck would you do something like this?" I repeated. "Why?"

At first he tried to deny it. "I didn't make them."

"I just heard you say you did."

"Marc made them," Dennis admitted. "Come on, relax, it's just a joke."

"Why the fuck would you . . . *he* . . . put my home phone number on this thing?"

While Dennis just stood there smiling, I stormed off pissed, and I remained pissed at him for the remainder of the day. I was still so upset with him at the banquet that when it came time to give him a special award I had prepared for him, which he knew nothing about, I went up to the podium and said some pretty bad stuff about him. Jim Cornette cut me off and said something like, "And Howard likes Dennis. Imagine what he would say if he didn't like him."

Unfortunately, that would not be the only time I'd fall victim to a Coralluzzo rib. Several months later, when new NWA champion Naoya Ogawa was touring the U.S., Dennis, Doug Gilbert and others made a series of phone calls to me after a show to tell me the finish got screwed up. As the rib went, Doug, who worked for IWA in Japan, accidentally pinned Ogawa, who worked for UFO, which resulted in a real fight breaking out between them and a bunch of arrests, including Gilbert, Ogawa and Dennis. The phone calls had a lot of commotion going on in the background, and it sounded like a real fight. NWA vice president Bill Behrens talked me down when I called him in a panic to help me sort it all out. I spoke to Dennis the next day about it, and he had a good laugh. I was an easy mark, and I cursed him for "getting me" good.

I suppose that was also part of Dennis Coralluzzo's charm. When it came to the wrestling business, he was just a big kid. But I wasn't the only victim. The team of Dennis and Marc pulled ribs on a lot of people, both friends and foes.

One of the craziest stories has to be what is commonly known throughout the

New Jersey independents as a porno movie called "Makin' the Bacon," which featured Gino Moore. As the story goes, Gino bragged that he had made a sex tape with a married woman using a hidden camera. When Dennis asked to see it, Gino of course refused. Doing what only he would do, Dennis put a bounty out on the tape, saying he would pay anyone who could deliver it to him. Well, it seems a guy by the name of Lee Keyes got a hold of it, through whatever means, and delivered it to collect the bounty. Deciding to make a big deal out of getting his hands on the tape, Dennis threw an after-hours party at Me and You Pizza in Deptford, New Jersey, and invited all of his crew to the premiere. In the movie Gino supposedly used a purple vibrator that he referred to as the "purple bomber." To perpetuate the rib after the screening, local wrestler Rik Ratchett, would sometimes work as the Purple Bomber.

But perhaps the best rib might be one that Jim Cornette, Rick Otazu (who Dennis named Rickey O because he couldn't pronounce his last name) and others still talk about nearly 10 years after Dennis's death.

When Jimmy still lived in Louisville, Kentucky, before moving to Connecticut to go to work for the WWF, Dennis would call him pretty frequently and knew the number by heart. One night while calling Cornette, Dennis was one digit off and got some nasty old woman by accident. She laid into him pretty good and was so hostile that Dennis called her again, which made her even more upset. That's all it took. He had literally everyone he knew call this woman asking for Jimmy. But instead of stopping at that, Dennis recorded every conversation with her and went so far as to put the compilation on a CD and gave it out as a Christmas gift one year.

While Dennis could be funny, he also had a very selfish side. And it was that self-centeredness that really pushed the bad blood between us over the top. He picked the wrong time and place to be self-absorbed, and what he did made me hate him for a very long time.

In early February 1999 I got a call from Victor Quinones saying he had been contacted by Simon Inoki (Antonio Inoki's son-in-law); Antonio wanted to book Dan Severn for a show in Yokohama against Naoya Ogawa (a silver medalist in judo at the 1992 Summer Olympics). The match would be for Antonio's new Universal Fighting Arts Organization (UFO), which was a mixture of pro wrestling and mixed martial arts. Simon had contacted Victor because he had brought Dan to Japan for his August 1995 match against Tarzan Goto at the Kawasaki Baseball Stadium; the same show that featured the infamous King of the Death Matches tournament. Victor put me in direct contact with Simon.

They wanted Dan to put Ogawa over and were willing to pay him $10,000 to do it. The problem was two-fold: I couldn't have the NWA world champion doing a straight out job, and Dan was already booked for two NWA-member shows that

weekend — one for Rich Arpin in Ohio, the other for Dennis in New Jersey. I knew if I didn't reach out to Dan and tell him of the offer, however, Simon would figure a way to reach him and the members would be screwed either way.

In the middle of all this, I received word from my brother Arnie that my 82-year-old mother had taken a bad fall and was in the hospital. Not being in good health to begin with, the prognosis was not good. I needed a way to get out to Las Vegas, but I couldn't afford it.

After a series of phone calls between Simon, Dan and Victor, I found myself flying to Los Angeles with Dan, where we sat down with the Inokis to work out the details of his March trip to Japan. Instead of flying back to Tampa after the meeting, however, the Inokis were kind enough to fly me through Las Vegas to see my mother, who had taken a turn for the worse.

I had planned to call Dennis and Rich when I got home to let them know what was going on with Dan and to try to work something out so it would not affect their planned shows, but being preoccupied with the situation with my mom, I did not contact them right away. In the meantime, before I even got to Las Vegas, the Japanese press broke the news that Dan Severn would defend his belt on March 14th in Yokohama and that I was at the meeting to seal the deal. Before I could call either of them to explain, word had already made its way to the U.S. via the Internet, and Dennis was leaving me frantic messages at home.

Wanting to curtail the situation, I tried calling Dennis first but couldn't reach him, so I left him a message that I would be at the hospital with my mother and would call him later that day. I was able to speak with Rich, and after explaining to him that the NWA was merely taking advantage of a booking Dan was going to make with or without us, he supported the decision and agreed to switch Dan's booking date without any fuss.

Dennis, however, wasn't as gracious. When I called him later that day, before I could explain the whole situation and all the nuances of the agreement, he ripped into me. He didn't care that the NWA would benefit from the booking, he didn't care that Dan was going to take the booking anyway and he didn't care that I was calling him from a pay phone in the hospital lobby. When I told him to wait until I got home in a couple of days to straighten everything out and to let me deal with my personal issue he refused, putting up an awful stink to get the issue resolved immediately. I only had two days in Las Vegas before I would be heading back to Tampa, and, instead of spending time with my mother, I spent most of that day on the telephone arguing with Dennis and going back and forth between him, Bill Behrens and Bob Trobich to try to reach a settlement — one that would not be resolved until a week or so later. Unfortunately I would never see my mother again, and I cursed

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

News of my meeting with Antonio Inoki and Dan Severn broke prematurely

Dennis for being so juvenile and denying me those few precious hours.

By the next NWA annual meeting in September 1999, Dennis had yet to pay back the money he owed, and he had started hearing rumblings that he might be kicked out. At the time the bylaws clearly stated that all monies owed to the organization must be paid by the start of the annual meeting otherwise membership is revoked. Dennis did not attend the meeting in Charlotte and sent Fred Rubenstein to represent him. Fred, who often served as an advisor to Dennis, had also become one of my key advisors on the NWA board, as an alternate to Jim Cornette. At breakfast Fred requested a private meeting with Bob Trobich and me. On behalf of Dennis, Fred pleaded for leniency and asked that we extend the deadline for Dennis to pay by three months. Still carrying the anger over the grief Dennis had caused me, I wanted nothing to do with any deal and flat out rejected it. Fred tried appealing to what he referred to as my "sense of loyalty." My response was, "Dennis should have thought about this when he had his hand in the till."

Although I was ready to play hardball, Bob played the "in the best interest of the NWA" card, saying that he thought removing Dennis from the organization would do more harm than good from a PR perspective. He noted that despite his shortcomings, Dennis was an active promoter who helped to keep the brand alive. I gave in and said I would support the request as long as he made an initial payment and continued to make monthly payments until he was caught up. Dennis's membership was renewed.

When Bob confirmed two weeks later that Dennis had not yet made a payment, I called Dennis. A week later there was still no check. I called Bill Behrens, who had become something of an ally for Dennis. Bill in turn called Dennis and

COURTESY DAISY WEI HAWKINS

Fred Rubenstein was not only a referee in the ring, he officiated in the boardroom too, trying to keep Dennis from losing his NWA membership

urged him to send something — just to show he was willing to make the effort.

In the meantime, Fred called to tell me Gino Moore and Joe Panzarino were thinking of leaving Dennis and starting their own promotion and that he might join them. When I asked why, he explained they were finding it harder and harder to find facilities that would work with Dennis and that Joe felt Dennis was ripping him off. Joe got the sponsorships for Dennis and Gino had been putting up the money to run the shows.

When Fred asked me what I thought about giving them the NWA membership if Dennis defaulted, I told him straight up that if Dennis started making payments it wouldn't happen. Fred then confided in me that Dennis had no intention to pay, and he was "going to call my bluff." I told Fred that if Dennis doesn't start making payments by mid-December he would be given a "drop dead" date, and if he still hadn't made a payment by then, New Jersey would be up for grabs.

Although I personally would have rather worked with Fred, I called Dennis again and gave him a series of deadlines and then reinforced the demand by faxing him the information and copying the board of directors. Bill called Dennis once more and pleaded with him, but Dennis was determined we were bluffing.

As the deadline approached, Fred again asked Dennis if he had sent in his payment, and again he said he wasn't going to, daring us to throw him out of the organization that he had saved. I told Fred that if he really wanted the territory, "Don't ask Dennis if he made payments or not."

After making a final plea by fax, I decided that Dennis had been given enough rope to either pull himself out of the hole or hang himself. Bill again made a last ditch effort to save Dennis by asking him to send in just a hundred dollars — again, Dennis didn't bother.

As mad as I was, deep down I wanted Dennis to stay with the organization. He

had brought me into the NWA, and I didn't want to be the one who would be known for having kicked him out. And I figured eventually we would patch things up. Besides, as Bob would say on many occasions, "You can argue one way or another about Dennis's business practices, but he played a key part in perpetuating the NWA's existence."

When the deadline came and no money had been received, the NWA board voted unanimously to terminate Dennis Coralluzzo's membership. The timing, however, couldn't have been worse. Unbeknownst to members of the board, Dennis's mother had taken ill. On the day before I faxed Dennis his termination letter, his mother had passed away. Dennis was furious and hurt; I came across like the biggest heel in the world for kicking a man while he was down. . . . And Dennis took full advantage of the situation by playing the sympathy card masterfully. Although I contended that business went on despite the situation, I was not looked upon favorably by members of the online wrestling press; I think the word that Dennis's crew used to describe me was "prick."

Donnie B., Rik Ratchett, Brian Heffron (a.k.a. the Blue Meanie) and others came to Dennis's defense and dumped on me pretty heavily. I would eventually make peace with both Donnie and Brian, but it would be years later and only following Dennis's death.

Although Dennis was not going to change his day-to-day operations because he was no longer part of the NWA, once he found out Fred and Joe got the NWA membership with Gino as an associate of theirs, he felt betrayed. Dennis believed the three of them took something that he had built and he had no warning that the trio was going to leave him and start their own promotion.

But Dennis would not go quietly. A year and a half earlier, he had orchestrated a membership transfer from Steve Corino, who owned the Pennsylvania-based NWA-2000, to his son Marc, citing precedence of membership transfers to Rich Arpin and to Bill Behrens. Although I attempted to block the transfer, as I didn't want Marc to have a say, claiming he was too young to make business decisions, Dennis was able to get enough board votes to push the membership through. However, in keeping with my concern, Marc would not be allowed to vote as part of the membership until he was of legal age to do so. Once Dennis's NWA membership was terminated, Marc all of a sudden wanted to begin promoting, as NWA-2000 had laid dormant for most of the time he owned it. We all knew the one or two shows that were run under the NWA-2000 banner since Marc had gotten the membership from Corino were run by Dennis.

So to block Dennis from being involved in NWA matters through his son's promotion, I moved to terminate Marc's membership for no other reason than the fact

that he was Dennis's son. Although technically Marc had done nothing wrong, despite an accusation by new members Fred and Joe that he ran an NWA-2000 show in their New Jersey territory, there was nothing in the bylaws at the time that stipulated a termination of membership had to be preceded by any specific action. All that was needed was a majority vote of the board of directors, which I was able to deliver. As wrong as it was, Marc Coralluzzo was unrightfully being sent to the gallows by me for the sins of his father.

Somewhere along the way I had finally become one of the piranhas I had spent so much of my time and effort trying to avoid.

With no chance to get back in with the NWA, Dennis did a "shoot" interview video and had some pretty choice words for a number of people, including me. While he wasn't as colorful in what he said about me as what he spewed about Joe, Gino and Fred, the comments bothered me when they first came out. In time, however, I knew the words were said out of anger and not malice. I suppose when it really came right down to it, Dennis was a lot of things, but hateful was not one of them.

After my initial irritation at the video, I began to feel a little guilty. Instead of being driven by a true sense of fairness, I had let my personal feelings and emotions call the shots. Eventually that guilt faded, and with the passage of time I have learned to accept that what he did and what he said about me was just his way of blowing off steam.

While some people claim Dennis Coralluzzo owed the mob more than $30,000 in gambling debts and had to pay an $1,800-a-week vig to a bookie to keep his health intact, it appears Dennis borrowed money by mortgaging his home and taking funds out of his insurance company, which put his business at risk. While at times he might have been associated with some shady characters, the money he owed was not to an organized crime family.

In the early '90s Dennis's company, Excalibur Promotions, got popped for misrepresentation during fundraising activities, and after losing all his licenses Dennis had to pay in excess of $50,000 in fines. After that, Gino Moore began getting involved financially — although he was never Dennis's partner despite his claim otherwise.

A few months before Dennis passed away, rumors started circulating that he was hooked on painkillers, and the source of those rumors were people close to him. Marc, however, discredited the reports, claiming that Dennis was on prescription medicine to treat his ongoing battle with diabetes and part of his recovery from triple-bypass surgery. Although it was not openly discussed, Dennis had been

diagnosed with heart disease at a young age.

Dennis's death in July 2001 not only came as a complete shock to me, but to those who were closest to him. Even after everything he had been through health-wise Dennis was fighting hard to get back on his feet despite having lost nearly everything; he was living in a one-bedroom garden apartment, and his marriage was in shambles. Like many of us, even though the business had not been good to him, he was determined to make a comeback. He was in the process of putting together another NWA-type coalition that included East Coast Wrestling Association's Jim Kettner, one of his closest friends and, next to Jim Cornette, the only person in wrestling he trusted.

During some of his final hours, Dennis enjoyed himself by attending a card and toy show at the Meadowlands Convention Center with Rickey O, mingling with people like Joanie Laurer (a.k.a. Chyna), actress Lindsay Wagner and some of the minor characters from *The Sopranos*. His big find of the day was some politically incorrect cartoons that were banned in the United States.

That night at home he began feeling dizzy. When he started throwing up, his oldest son, Dennis Jr., and Kettner brought him to the emergency room; a CAT scan was ordered for the next morning. During the night, while trying to get out of bed, Dennis hit his head on a rail. Within an hour of the accident he began slurring his words and talking gibberish. Dennis coded while he was on the table for the CAT.

As hard as this may be to believe, Dennis's death was almost as controversial as his life. At his wake the New Jersey State Police showed up to verify that the body was actually his. Apparently there was an ongoing investigation, and the authorities wanted to verify this wasn't some cockamamie attempt by Dennis to escape possible prosecution.

At his funeral, some people who owed much of their careers to Dennis were notably absent, and Jim Cornette ripped into them with a zest only he could display; he loved Dennis and wept openly for his fallen friend.

When I got the news of Dennis's death, all those guilty feelings I had previously about expelling him from the NWA came rushing back to me. Perhaps the biggest regret I have is that I never made peace with Dennis before he passed away. It was my olive branch to extend, and unfortunately I never offered it up.

In an attempt to make up for my guilt, just three months after his death, I planned to honor Dennis at the NWA 53rd anniversary show I was hosting. Dire opposition in the NWA boardroom, however, forced me to scratch those plans. I should have listened to my heart instead of the critics. When I heard that Dennis would be inducted into the NWA Hall of Fame in 2009, I felt the honor was long overdue.

If not for Dennis's friendship with Jim Cornette, my own friendship with the legendary wrestling manager would never have developed.

Because Dennis knew I had contacts overseas with Ring Warriors, and knew Cornette was struggling financially with Smokey Mountain Wrestling (SMW), he thought perhaps I could help Jimmy generate some income for SMW. Since he considered both of us friends, he never asked for anything in return. Although SMW would eventually go out of business, by the time I closed two overseas deals for Jimmy with Sumitomo Corporation in Japan and DSF in Germany — doing business as Todd Brody, Howard Brody's cousin, as suggested by Hiro Matsuda to avoid any potential conflict of interest with Eurosport that could jeopardize Ring Warriors — SMW had not only paid off their debts, but Jim had turned a profit, and I had made about $20,000 in commissions.

Bob Trobich once said of Dennis, "I don't know if he has an honest bone in his body, but at the same time he was the type of character that makes wrestling a fascinating business."

At bottom every man knows well enough that he is a unique being, only once on this earth; and by no extraordinary chance will such a marvelously picturesque piece of diversity in unity as he is, ever be put together a second time.

— Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

FOURTEEN

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

COURTESY SHELDON GOLDBERG

Posing with Sheldon Goldberg (center) and Craig Cohen (right) on the day I became NWA president

My God, this is a hell of a job! I have no trouble with my enemies . . . but my damn friends; they're the ones that keep me walking the floor nights.
— Warren G. Harding (1865–1923)

There were many times between October 1996 and the fall of 2001 when I thought being president of the National Wrestling Alliance was a frustrating, thankless task. Despite often putting the organization's needs before my own and doing what I considered was in the best interest of the NWA, and no matter how much progress

was made during that period, there was always someone on the other end of a telephone or behind a computer keyboard criticizing me.

Sometimes I dealt with so much crap from our members that I began to wonder if the job of running the organization was more suited to a plumber than the visionary administrator I wanted to be. Bill Behrens, who was the vice president of the organization throughout my term, regularly reminded me that being president of the NWA meant when the shit fell, it hit me first. While he frequently encouraged me to duck, he also used to thank God I was bigger than him because, as he used to say, it made it easier for him to hide.

Despite the warnings and all the crap I caught — and even though the base salary for the position and its benefits and bonuses added up to a big, fat zero — it was still one of the most gratifying experiences I ever had. It was so satisfying that sometimes, when I think back to the end of 2001, I wish I had never made the decision to step down from the presidency, resign from the board of directors and quit the organization.

Before asking Dennis Coralluzzo and Steve Rickard to give me the opportunity to see what I could do to resurrect the brand, I really had no aspirations to do anything more than just run some shows under the NWA banner. Ring Warriors was my primary focus, and I was content with doing a show here and there, just to maintain my membership. The presidency of the organization was the furthest thing from my mind when I joined. But when I saw that Dennis and Steve really had no specific plan or direction for the NWA's much needed growth, despite Dennis trying his best to get others like me on board, I felt drastic action was called for. And so with the same ego that made me think I could succeed at wrestling in the first place, I took on the task of trying to pump life into the dying dinosaur. The only difference between then and when I first started promoting seven years earlier was that I had some experience to go along with my sometimes brash, inflated ego, and the fact that I had established a number of relationships with people that could actually help grow the NWA brand.

Quite a bit that goes on in wrestling centers around relationships — whether they are between the wrestlers, between the promoters, between the wrestlers and promoters or between the wrestlers, the promoters and the fans. When business is good and everyone knows and plays their part, these relationships are not only good, but they thrive. In many ways, the decisions I made during my tenure as president of the NWA were based on the relationships I had with various people.

Not long after becoming the president — and prompted by the fact that WCW was pushing the NWO, which I always thought was suspiciously close in name to the NWA — I began asking Jim Cornette, who was working in the WWF booking

office, what he thought about doing some kind of angle using the NWA brand on WWF television. Cornette, not one to pull punches, told me straight up he didn't think it would fly, but he would ask. He was immediately shot down, but the seed was planted.

Since the McMahons had become so friendly toward me, and considering I had been offered a job with the WWF, I began to call and fax Vince's office weekly with proposals on using the NWA brand on WWF television shows. Each week I sent them a new proposal or idea, and I would get a "thanks but no thanks" response.

While I continued the barrage, Dennis Coralluzzo ran his second Eddie Gilbert Memorial show in New Jersey — the one during which Dan Severn refused to put over Dory Funk Jr. The situation put me in a precarious spot because, while I liked Dan and he was our world champion, Dory was one of the all-time greats. He was also the first wrestler I ever met face-to-face — when I handed him my résumé a decade and a half earlier — so I had a loyalty to him too. I had great business relationships with both, and I didn't want to have to choose between the two.

What I really wanted to do was book them to face each other for my November show in Gainesville, Florida. But because of what happened in New Jersey, Dory wasn't going for that. So I booked them separately: Dan to work with Greg Valentine, and Dory to work with Steve Keirn, the then NWA Florida champion. In an attempt to smooth things out with the Funks, I decided to give Dory the Florida title as a consolation prize. So despite the heat between them, Dan and Dory would appear on the same show.

As the show date grew nearer, I started to get a lot of grief from Marti about Dan being booked on the same card as Dory. She called me at strange hours and said terrible, unfounded things about Dan, some of which had nothing to do with wrestling. It was painfully obvious that Marti had disdain for Dan because she felt he had disrespected her husband.

Not that she was completely wrong. I felt Dan had disrespected Dory a bit as well, but you work through those issues and try not to let them cloud your overall decision-making process. When it came to Marti, however, there were times I felt the pond was only filled halfway. If you could do something for her and her husband, Marti was a loyal friend who would back you up and be on your side no matter what, verbally supporting anything you wanted to accomplish. But if Marti felt she or Dory were affronted or disrespected, even slightly, she'd come at you with a vengeance. Unfortunately, I got to see both sides of the obstinate Mrs. Funk.

During one of those phone calls I tried to put an end to the heat and asked Marti what it would take to smooth things out between them. She told me it was either going to be Dan putting Dory over in the middle of the ring for the world

title or, at the very least, figuring out a way for Dory to make "Japan-type money" from what she referred to as the "New Jersey fiasco" in order to save face.

I didn't have the type of money Marti was referring to. I would normally pay Dory $300 for wrestling on my cards, but "Japan-type money" meant a payday in the thousands. I began to think, "What if we could create a scenario in which Dory, the former gaijin booker for All-Japan Pro Wrestling, would wrestle Dan and take the NWA title from him in Japan?" This would accomplish the big payday he was looking for and help him save face.

When I ran the question by the Funks, Marti was cold to doing anything with Dan, but Dory, being an opportunist and having a great head for the business, said he thought it could work — but only if we somehow used the backstory of the heat between he and Dan to set up a "legitimate" confrontation between them that could be captured by the Japanese press and be shown in Japan. We weren't exactly sure what we were going to do, but we had the basis of an idea in place.

With the Funks on board, I called Dan and laid out the basics. Knowing a Japanese booking against Dory could generate a big payoff, Dan agreed to do what was needed to set up the match. After a couple of phone calls between them, everyone agreed that Dan would put Dory over in Japan and that Dory would reciprocate in the States, most likely at a show promoted by Dennis. But in order for the idea to work, everyone agreed to keep things hush-hush; I didn't even clue in Dennis. In the weeks leading up to the show, whenever Dan or Dory did any interview they would throw a little jab at each other to set the stage.

While I continued reaching out to the WWF with faxes and phone calls, there was little else going on in the organization. Because I had fairly regular telephone conversations with Dennis, Bob, Steve and Victor, there wasn't a great need to hold a face-to-face business meeting, so for the first time in the NWA's then 49-year history, the annual meeting was conducted as a teleconference. The two main things that came out of the meeting were that the members let me continue serving as NWA president and that we would give the organization six months to get the exposure it needed. If we couldn't make it by then, we'd dissolve.

A few weeks after the teleconference it was time for the Gainesville show. On the morning of the event I drove from Tampa to Orlando to pick up Dan, who would then drive with me up to Ocala, where we would have a lunch meeting with the Funks at their home.

Dory and Marti were extremely warm and hospitable when we arrived, and if there was any heat it didn't show. While part of the meeting concerned how we would move the NWA world title from Dan to Dory and then back, the primary focus was how we were going to execute the setup that night. Dory had an idea in

mind. Since his plan was rooted in reality he felt it would work, but only if nobody else was clued in. When I questioned whether it was smart to "work the workers," Dory admitted that it was the ultimate high to execute something so real that others would wonder if it was a "work" or a "shoot." Funk explained how his father and former NWA president Sam Muchnick once worked the other promoters at one of the NWA annual meetings. Dory Sr. came late to the meeting, and Muchnick fined him. After a lot of complaining, Dory took out his wallet and paid the fine on the spot, saying something to the effect that if he had to pay a fine he would expect everyone else to as well. This ensured nobody ever came late to a meeting. Afterward, when they were alone, Sam gave Dory Sr. back his money for putting on the show.

Because Dan drove with me, he was the first person at the show and already in the dressing room as the other workers began arriving. As planned, Dory was the last to show up, ensuring that the deal he and Dan worked out would get maximum exposure.

I was in the dressing room giving everyone a quick rundown of the card. The last two matches would be Dory against Keirn followed by Dan against Typhoon. Just as I was finishing, Dory came in on cue, and, after saying his hellos, he glanced Dan's way and sarcastically asked, "Do I have to get dressed in the same room as the great Dan Severn?"

I looked Dory straight in the face and in front of the other workers said, "Please Dory, not here. I know what happened in New Jersey so just promise me there won't be any trouble tonight."

"No trouble," he promised.

Throughout the night some of the workers came up to tell me that Dory and Dan were trading verbal jabs and there appeared to be real heat. That was music to my ears because it meant the wrestlers were buying into it. At first Dan and Dory played it like old-fashioned ribbing and made sure they exchanged barbs in front of the other workers. Aside from that they really didn't interact at all. Dan made a point to tell me near some of the other workers that he wasn't happy with Dory's attitude and asked me to just keep Dory out of his face.

Dory won his match, which we made sure was the last before intermission by switching the order — so there wouldn't be any chance of a "confrontation" while Dory was coming out of the ring and Dan was going in. Dory got showered and dressed but waited around as Marti was still shooting photos for the Japanese press. Also in attendance was Bill Otten, who shot for *Baseball Sha* magazine, one of the biggest wrestling magazines in Japan. Like a true veteran, Dory stayed in the back and watched the last two matches — Adrian Street versus the Firecat (a.k.a. Brady

Boone) and Dan versus Fred Ottman (a.k.a. Typhoon), who subbed for Greg Valentine, as Greg's mom supposedly took ill a few nights before the show.

After Dan's match, which he won with an arm bar submission, Dan stopped to sign some autographs. Marti, who had purposely downed a couple of beers during the night to play up a possible intoxication angle, packed away her camera equipment and was now drinking bottled water and talking to some friends who came to the show from Ocala. Marti, being her rambunctious self, was kidding around and splashed me with water. I pretended to get hot, and she said, "Don't you have a sense of humor?" I told her it wasn't the time or the place, playing to the handful of people.

At that point, Dan walked back toward the dressing room, and Marti did the same thing to him, and his reaction was the same as mine. She repeated to him, "Don't you have a sense of humor?" At first Dan just continued on, but then she splashed him again, so Dan turned around and said something to her. I was out of range and didn't hear exactly what he said, but that was the signal to prompt Dory to grab Dan by the arm and ask him what was wrong. I quickly made my way back to them, and Dan said he didn't appreciate being splashed with water. Marti said it was a joke and Dan was acting hot, which lead to words between Dory and Dan.

Keeping up with the act, I pulled the two of them aside. At this point there were about 35 to 50 people, wrestlers included, standing around gawking, including John Alexander, a circuit judge from Jacksonville who was covering the show for Wade Keller's *Pro Wrestling Torch*. Dan played hot that people were looking and asked to go somewhere more private, which we did, but the small group followed, eating it up.

Dory and especially Dan were about to give a performance of a lifetime.

Bill Otten, who had just put away his camera, sensed something was up and took it back out and began snapping away, which is just what we wanted because the whole thing was being done for the Japanese press.

Dory started riding Dan about how he thinks he is above the business, and Marti chimed in, calling him a bum. Dory then challenged Dan to get in the ring. Dan said he respected Dory but had nothing to prove to him, and then Dan turned toward me and jumped down my throat, saying it was just like what had happened in New Jersey with Dennis, which was perfect because that was the backstory we needed to feed off of.

Dory kept pressing Dan, saying, "I want to see what you got. Let's get in the ring." Dory said something to the effect that while he thought Dan was a great shooter, he wasn't worthy of being an NWA world champion and the NWA should think about what direction it wanted to take. Those words, unfortunately, teetered on reality.

This went on for about 15 minutes, and Dan finally got pissed enough that the two of them went into the ring — as it was being taken down.

The only person I clued in ahead of time about the confrontation being a work was Ray Blackburn, the guy who did my ring. I told him no matter what went on between them to continue breaking down the ring. The small crowd that stood around watched as I barked out orders to Dan and Dory to "get out of the ring," and when they wouldn't listen, I instructed Ray to keep taking down the ring.

What gave the scenario an air of legitimacy was that the two executed the challenge not like a street fight or a fight rooted in hatred, but more like what the boys who had reputations used to do in years past when they wanted to test each other. So the two of them got in the ring and "wrestled." Everyone who was watching bought into the confrontation, except for one person — Jeff Bradley, who had been trained by Malenko and Hiro.

When the squared circle was stripped down to the wood, Dan finally rolled out and said he didn't have anything more to prove. He acted so ticked off at me that he didn't even bother to shower and instead grabbed his stuff out of the locker room and, without changing out of his clothes, caught a ride to his hotel from one of the fans he knew. I actually had to go to the hotel later on to settle up with him; he got so caught up in the work he left without taking his pay. Typhoon was so mad at Marti and Dory for what he thought was putting Dan on the spot that he snubbed them when he left.

While all that was going on, the Alachua County Sheriff's Department showed up with about a half-dozen officers wanting to know what was going on. They had their nightsticks and pepper spray in hand and were ready to pounce on the ring to break things up. One officer asked me if the fight was real, and I didn't know what to say. I was afraid that if I said yes, which it wasn't, perhaps they would arrest Dan and Dory, leaving me responsible for bailing them out of jail because I was the promoter of record. When I told them the truth and said no, the officer turned around and wanted to lock me up for attempting to incite a riot. I had to do some pretty fancy footwork to avoid spending the night in the Alachua County Jail. The funny thing is the wrestlers who were watching thought I was lying to the police to protect Dan and Dory.

Afterward, when I was alone with the Funks, Dory told me I should have let the police arrest them because it would have made the whole thing as real as possible. He said you can't buy publicity like that and it would have made the newspapers and perhaps even the national news.

Unfortunately, while the incident made a big buzz online and in the newsletters and grabbed the attention of some Japanese promoters, neither the Funks nor

I were able to get any serious offers to bring the Severn-Funk match to Japan. Dennis called me the next day wanting to know what had happened, and when I filled him in it that the whole thing was a work, he was pissed off. But when I explained the plan to him and how it would directly benefit him, he was happy and to my knowledge never mentioned it to anyone. Over the years Dan has told me that some fans still ask him whether or not the deal between he and Dory was a shoot, and like a trooper he never gives them a straight answer.

Dory is good at keeping a secret too, so good that even his own brother thought it was a shoot.

A couple of months after my show, when Dennis and I found ourselves at the New Haven Coliseum in Connecticut to do *Raw*, we were talking to Terry Funk, who was there doing his Chainsaw Charlie gimmick. Terry was claiming that kayfabe was dead because of the Internet and said that nothing in the business was sacred anymore — that secrets couldn't be kept like they used to be. When I disagreed with him saying that kayfabe could exist provided everybody was in on the work, he said it wouldn't happen because "now everybody knows what's going on behind the scenes." He brought up the situation between Dory and Dan, saying fans even knew about their backstage altercation. He then said he couldn't believe his brother was "stupid enough to try to test Dan like that." When I asked him what he was talking about, Terry asked, "Well, wasn't it at your show where they got into that whole mess?"

"Yeah," I said, stunned he didn't know the whole story. "But the whole thing was a work."

Terry looked at me in disbelief, and when he realized I was telling him the truth, he got up from the table we were sitting at and walked away. I couldn't tell if the look on his face was from embarrassment, disgust or anger and wasn't sure if it was directed toward me or his brother, but I knew whatever it was, he did not like my revelation.

Right after the Gainesville show I continued reaching out to McMahon's office. It was the week of Thanksgiving, and after 11 months of trying to get their attention, my efforts were still falling on deaf ears. Since Cornette couldn't help and it was obvious McMahon didn't want anything to do with the NWA brand, it was over. I called Dennis, and when I told him, I could hear disappointment in his voice, but he knew where we stood. We chose to run out the clock instead of punting and to let the NWA just slowly fade with time.

About a month later, during a Sunday night booking committee meeting, McMahon, Cornette, Vince Russo and the rest of the writing staff were trying to come up with a story line for Jeff Jarrett, who was returning to the WWF. Someone

suggested he hold some type of championship and touted himself as being representative of some imaginary organization. While McMahon liked the concept, he didn't like the idea of a fictional group. He then turned to Cornette and asked, "What about the NWA?"

Cornette knew all too well that we would jump at the chance to get the NWA brand on WWF television, especially after trying for nearly a year. I suppose McMahon's question had nothing to do with the faxes I had been sending since late January but everything to do with McMahon's moment of brilliance, hatching the masterful plan to leverage a struggling organization that had once been a household name . . .

That same Sunday night Cornette called me in Tampa to ask if Dennis and I could be in New Haven on Tuesday, explaining that they wanted to give the NWA North American title to Jarrett. I later learned that they initially wanted Jarrett to have the world title, but Cornette knew we wouldn't go for that. Without hesitation I said yes, and Cornette said he would call Dennis to fill him in. A half hour later Dennis called me, pumped. He knew the exposure on WWF TV would mean a major boost to his shows in Jersey.

The next morning, before going to work, I stopped by Hiro's house to let him know what was going on. I asked him if he had any issues with me appearing on WWF television because we were still trying to make Ring Warriors work. He said he didn't object since it would be a one-time thing.

Tuesday morning came soon enough, and after a flight to Newark and a taxi to Connecticut — no Andre the Giant limo for me this time around — I arrived at the New Haven Coliseum a little after noon. I was a bit nervous because in a few hours I would be standing in a WWF ring in front of more than 10,000 people. Even though I knew the show would be taped as opposed to airing live and the role Dennis and I would play was going to be limited, I was still worried that I might somehow screw up. I had never been in front of that many people before, and the millions of eyeballs who would be watching on TV made it imposing.

After sitting around most of the day, it was time for Dennis and me to get ready for our spot. We ended up in a dressing area that included Jim Ross, Jerry Lawler, Pat Patterson, the referees, Mick Foley and the late Owen Hart. When I went to grab my suit from its garment bag . . . Wardrobe Malfunction Number Three! No pants. Again. All that was in the garment bag was my suit jacket. It's one thing to have half your butt sticking out in a Middle Eastern city, and it was quite embarrassing when I met Antonio Inoki with pants that didn't fit, but this was going to be a whole other level of awkwardness. This time there would be millions of people around the world watching me.

I was wearing a pair of taupe slacks and my suit jacket was charcoal gray with light gray pinstripes — not exactly a match. I had also brought along another pair of slacks to travel home in, but unfortunately camel-colored dress pants wouldn't work either. If only I had checked my bag earlier I could have corrected the problem. Unfortunately I had to try to make do with what I had.

While Dennis shook his head in disbelief at my carelessness, Lawler was pulling a bit of a rib by having me get dressed and undressed several times, trying on different combinations of clothes. I was so nervous I didn't realize what he was doing, and I thought he was trying to help rather than making me look like a bigger fool than I already was.

Finally Patterson walked back into the room and asked about a jacket that was hanging on a coat hook on one of the walls. Although the sports coat was hideously loud, the colors actually worked with what I had, so I put it on — only to find that the arms were about four inches too long for me. The jacket belonged to Rob Maillet (a.k.a. Kurrgan), who had accidentally left it in the room earlier in the day. Desperately short on time, Dennis and Lawler convinced me to pull up the sleeves and wear that jacket to the ring.

When Cornette came to the room to get us, he looked at me and asked, "Aren't you going to get dressed?"

When I told him I was, he looked me up and down and said, "Jesus Christ, Howard, how the hell can you go on TV looking like that?"

After explaining what happened, Cornette swore again. I was now more concerned with trying to keep the sleeves of my jacket in place than the large crowd.

Jarrett, who was in tow with Cornette, smirked a bit, saying, "I guess it'll just be part of his gimmick."

What I was not aware of was that Lawler had told Cornette how nervous I was about going to the ring, so to keep my mind off of the crowd Cornette switched my attention to what I was wearing by making a bigger issue out of it than it really was. It worked.

As we stood at the backstage entrance waiting for our cue to walk to the ring, Cornette asked me what our official titles were. While I was president, Dennis really didn't have one as he was just a member of the board, so on the fly I told Cornette to announce him as executive vice president.

"That'll work," Dennis said. It's funny how that title stuck and in some instances has been reported as fact over the years. It actually was just a work for TV and subsequently the NWA website.

Jarrett tried to get my mind further off the crowd by asking me if I thought Dan Severn would be willing to work a program with him for the world title. It was the

COURTESY *WWF Raw Magazine*

With Jim Cornette, Jeff Jarrett and a very large sports jacket on *Raw*

first time I realized how important that title meant to Jeff. "I'm sure we could work something out," I said.

And before I could utter another sound I heard Cornette say, "Let's go," and he led Dennis and I down the ramp and into the WWF ring.

Once in the squared circle, Cornette introduced us to the crowd and television audience as the executive vice president and president, respectively, of "the National Wrestling Alliance, the oldest and at one time largest sanctioning body of professional wrestling in the world."

After the introductions, Dennis and I sat ringside as Jarrett and Barry Windham were announced for the match with the winner getting the title. Earlier in the day, when they were trying to determine an opponent for Jarrett to beat, I suggested to Cornette that they consider Barry, who was a former NWA world champion, member of the Four Horsemen and whose ties with the NWA ran deep. They went with my suggestion as he and John "Bradshaw" Layfield were just about done with trying to revive the Blackjacks tag team they were doing.

For the most part we just sat ringside, with me holding the title belt on my lap. Dennis, however, actually got involved in the finish, when he distracted the referee

while Cornette blasted Windham with a tennis racquet.

Immediately afterward Dennis and I climbed back into the ring to give Jarrett the belt. Then I saw Dennis run across the ring to the far side, and I remembered that "Stone Cold" Steve Austin was supposed to hit the ring right after Jarrett won so he could do the stunner on him. Cornette told us that if we were in the ring Austin would do the stunner on us too, whether we wanted him to or not, so to get the hell out of there as fast as we could. When I saw Dennis make his move, I didn't think twice and was surprised at how fast my fat little legs could run as I bolted from the ring and jumped right through the top and second ropes and onto the floor. Dennis headed up the ramp, and I followed him. Once backstage, however, I remembered that Dennis and I were supposed to stay ringside to help Jarrett back to his feet. After Austin came back from the ring I waited a minute then headed back down the ramp and back into the ring to help Cornette raise Jarrett's hand in victory. Although that part never made it to TV, as they pretty much cut after Austin hit Jeff with the stunner, *WWF Raw Magazine* did snap a photo, capturing the moment for posterity.

Once our spot was over, Vince came up to us backstage and shook our hands, thanking us for helping them out with the angle, although it really was the WWF who was helping us out. We reciprocated by thanking Vince for putting us on television.

Cornette, always one to take advantage of a captive audience, commented, "We have the belt now, Vince!" at which McMahon chuckled. Cornette was referring to the NWA lawsuit against the WWF a few years earlier, when Ric Flair left WCW and went to the WWF bringing the "10 pounds of gold" NWA world title belt with him.

Although we taped the spot in December, the segment didn't air until Monday night January 5th. It was a bit odd to watch myself on television — I had to laugh when Jim Ross remarked that I was a "well-dressed man," obviously being sarcastic and playing into my paranoia from that night. I knew that Cornette had put him up to making that comment.

Although Dennis and I believed the appearance on *Raw* would give the NWA some new legitimacy and perhaps help us sell shows locally, the biggest question we had at the time was how to parlay that exposure into something more meaningful. We were not prepared for what happened next.

The day after our segment aired, Dennis received a call from a guy named Ed Chuman, based out of Bloomington, Illinois. Ed, who had just started a promotion called Midwest Championship Wrestling, had a background in staging, lighting design and some concert merchandising. He and his partner, Buddy Sokolick, thought they could benefit from the NWA name. Dennis gave them a large chunk of the country for their $500 entrance fee.

"Don't you think that's a bit much?" I asked, considering the size of the territory and that they had never promoted a show before.

"What's the difference?" Dennis responded. "I'm not going to promote there. Are you?"

"Well, no," I said, "But what if we get other inquiries?"

"It's not like they're beating down our door to join," he said.

And they weren't. Not yet.

A couple of days later I received a call from a promoter in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, named Jim Miller, who ran a small promotion called Pro Wrestling Xpress. He knew Jim Cornette, and when he inquired about joining the NWA, Corney told him to call me. Eager to add another promoter to the mix, and based on Jim's recommendation that Miller was an "okay guy," I welcomed him aboard but wasn't as liberal with the size of his territory as Dennis had been with Chuman. Because he had local television, he was given a loosely defined area: wherever his television was seen was where he could promote.

The more exposure the WWF gave the NWA, the more promoters were interested in what we were doing, and the phone began ringing off the hook. Dennis started to receive regular calls, and I began to get emails from the rinky-dink website I maintained. Promoters wanted to be involved with the NWA.

Neither of us knew at first how to handle the influx of promoters who were willing to fork over a $500 membership fee and $100 a year for their annual dues. When money started coming in, Dennis asked me, "How much of this [money] can we take?"

"Nothing," I said, surprised but not shocked he would think that way. "We can't do that. We need it to run the organization."

The days of us doing whatever we wanted and the others going along with it were over. We had to take a step back and rethink our position, as I knew there would be some form of accountability to the members, who were now as much a stakeholder in the NWA as we were.

Two of the stakeholders that came into the fold during the early part of '98 were Music City Wrestling, run by Bert Prentice out of Nashville, and Ohio Valley Wrestling, run by Danny Davis out of Louisville. At the time they were the top independent promotions in the country, and having them as part of the reinvigorated NWA was a big shot in the arm.

It was during this time that I got my first true test as president. A guy in California named Jonathan Dodd, who had minor success in Canada working for the Hart family and Stampede Wrestling under the name Jonathan Holliday, claimed that he owned the National Wrestling Alliance name and sent the World

Wrestling Federation a cease and desist for doing the NWA angle. Dodd held no claim to the name. One day he decided to call himself the NWA and asked people like Lou Thesz and Don Owens to be on his board of directors, who had no idea he did not have any rights to the brand. While the WWF front office knew the claim was unsubstantiated, it was a headache they did not anticipate, and despite my attempt to resolve the issue quickly with a phone call to Dodd, he insisted the NWA was his through some decree from Thesz and Owens. Once I engaged Bob Trobich to send a letter threatening legal action to Dodd's attorney, Dodd dropped his claim to the name.

Unfortunately, Jonathan Dodd wasn't the only person who tried to cash in on the NWA brand. A slew of rogue promoters who were not affiliated with us tried to capitalize on our name, and identifying and sending them cease and desist letters kept Bob and I busy.

One of the things I was most happy about as new members continued to join was the cash flow that came with them; I was no longer burdened with having to pay the expenses of running the organization out of my own pocket. Since wsw was no longer taking care of non–Ring Warrior phone expenses, as it had been doing previously, the $200 and $300 monthly phone bills for NWA business were choking me. I could no longer afford to pay that expense out of my own pocket, so I began submitting copies of my bills for repayment, and each month Bob would send me a reimbursement check.

In the meantime, the WWF begun accelerating the NWA-invasion angle, and the more exposure they gave us, the more potential members jumped on board. While the NWA was certainly benefiting from the rub it was getting from the WWF, Cornette took advantage of the situation as well, getting work for as many of his friends as possible and helping to perpetuate the storyline. Perennial NWA world tag team champs Ricky Morton and Robert Gibson (a.k.a. the Rock 'n' Roll Express), who were also mainstays for Corney's Smoky Mountain Wrestling, were brought in to feud and put over the duo of Charles Warrington and Glen Ruth, better know as Mosh and Thrasher (a.k.a. the Headbangers). Even longtime NWA referee Tommy Young, who had pretty much retired due to a severe back injury in 1989, was brought in to officiate several matches.

Eventually Dan Severn cut a deal with Vince McMahon, and when he finally debuted on WWF television, he did so as the NWA world heavyweight champion. In one of the spots he did on TV, Dan came to the ring dressed in a suit and tie and single-handedly disposed of the Headbangers, suplexing both. When he was done, he got up from the mat and very matter-of-factly straightened out his suit and adjusted his tie as though this was business as usual. He was being positioned as a

badass, which was the best way to present him.

However, the WWF creative team dropped the ball soon thereafter. Instead of putting Dan over like the legit in-ring monster he was in UFC, they paired him with Steve Blackman. Although he was a fine martial artist in his own right, Blackman was nowhere near Dan's caliber and was having problems getting over with the crowd despite some high-profile story lines involving the Hart Foundation and Vader. The real money for Dan in the WWF was in a ready-made feud between him and Ken Shamrock, another former UFC competitor. The two had legit heat, and historically the WWF was always able to capitalize on feuds that were rooted in legitimacy and turn them into moneymakers.

Severn and Shamrock had met head-to-head twice in UFC, each taking a match. The rubber match was there for the picking. Instead, when Dan's feud with Blackman ran its course, they put him into a program with Owen Hart, and at one point they concocted a story line in which Dan suffered a severe neck injury, killing his tough-guy image. Dan often came across bland on television, so I suppose the WWF felt Owen would be able to help him. Based on my experience, however, all they had to do was tell Dan exactly what they wanted from him, and he would have delivered. Perhaps they felt they shouldn't have to say anything to him and that Dan should know better.

But killing Dan's image was par for the course for the WWF at the time. He was not the only victim of poor creative judgment. One of their stupidest ideas was a shootfighting tournament called Brawl for All. This ridiculous concept had workers with tough-guy images wearing gloves and being involved in real bouts. Because the money was good, Dan decided to go along with the program. However, after being frustrated by his match with the Godfather, the judging — his takedowns were repeatedly ruled "not clean" — and the fact that he had to wear gloves, Dan withdrew from the tournament after I convinced him there was too much at risk. If he were still to pursue matches in UFC, which he intended to do, a loss in the Brawl for All would greatly reduce his earning potential. Even though Dan won his first round match, the Godfather advanced in the tourney, and the WWF later rewrote history to say that Dan lost on points.

Withdrawing from the tournament was the right choice because Steve "Dr. Death" Williams's reputation as one of wrestling's toughest guys was erased with one punch in the third round of his match with Bart Gunn. Because Williams's tough-guy mystique was being built for his character, the knockout effectively ended his push, put him on the shelf for a few months and created a scenario from which he was never able to rebound.

Despite negating Dan's effectiveness through a poor story line, the WWF

continued with the NWA angle, even though the main focus of the company's wrestling product was shifting to their new "attitude" format with Austin, Degeneration X and some of the elements of hardcore wrestling that they were lifting from ECW.

In spite of everything, Cornette continued to keep the WWF-NWA angle alive. At one point, against his better judgment, Cornette was even convinced to resurrect the Midnight Express name in the WWF, but instead of Randy Rose, "Loverboy" Dennis Condrey, "Beautiful" Bobby Eaton or "Sweet" Stan Lane resuming their roles for one of the most celebrated tag teams in wrestling history, the late 1990s version saw Bob Holly (as Bombastic Bob) and Bart Gunn (as Bodacious Bart) thrown together as the New Midnight Express, with Cornette as their manager. Although they captured the NWA world tag team championship from the Headbangers, they did not achieve much success in the Fed, and wrestling historians mostly turn a blind eye to that bastardized version of the legendary team.

One of the biggest advantages for the NWA was its ability to book second-tier WWF talent on NWA events. Any member of the National Wrestling Alliance who was willing to shell out $300 or more could get wrestlers who were regularly seen on television, furthering the bond between the two organizations. And because Cornette handled what used to be referred to as third-party bookings, NWA promoters usually got preference over nonmembers for conflicting dates and could take advantage of the WWF brand to help boost their gate.

Perhaps it was that relationship that gave Dennis the initial idea for the NWA 50th. I added to the concept of presenting an event that would celebrate both the NWA's past and the future we were trying to forge.

But before we could address the NWA 50th, I was tested again as president of the organization when Don "Moose" Lewis, doing business under the International Wrestling Union/NWA Georgia banner and Bill Behrens, the point person for Music City Wrestling, had a dispute. I'd put Behrens in touch with Lewis, who needed help booking a show for June at the Cobb County Civic Center in Marietta, Georgia. Working with Cornette, Behrens put together a hell of a card, which included Dan Severn versus the WWF's Farooq, the New Midnight Express with Corney versus the Rock 'n' Roll Express, Scott and Steve Armstrong versus the Nightmares, plus the team of Jamie Dundee and Wofie D (a.k.a. PG-13), Abdullah the Butcher and other local favorites. Behrens busted his tail to book the show, and after agreeing to pay him a certain fee, Lewis decided he wanted to change the terms of the agreement and not pay Behrens anything. In addition, Lewis began calling Cornette in Connecticut and asking for favors. While Corney called me to say, "This *jabroni* is calling me 20 times a week," Behrens lodged a

formal complaint against Lewis; with no internal arbitration process in place, I had to make a ruling. To me it was a clear-cut decision as to who was right and who was wrong, and I ruled that Lewis had to fulfill his end of the agreement. When he refused, I gave him a specific date to comply by, and if he didn't uphold his end of the agreement his membership would be terminated. Don Lewis was the first new member to be terminated, although he wouldn't be the last.

About a month later, with the WWF's interest in pushing the NWA name starting to wane, I got a call from member Anthony Magliaro (a.k.a. Tony Rumble) of NWA New England with an interesting proposal about doing an angle with ECW in which Tazz would win the NWA world title from Dan Severn in a reunification match. Aside from being ultra-paranoid that it was an attempt by Paul Heyman to once again trash the organization, I received assurances from Tazz that he would be respectful of the title, and when I asked Tony if he could be trusted, Tony assured me that this would not be the debacle that the organization had faced four years earlier, provided Dennis was nowhere near the building when it went down. When I called Dan to ask him what he thought, he told me they had already reached out to him to see if he was game, and he said he wouldn't do anything with the belt without discussing it with me first.

Once I heard that Dan was game to work a program, I coordinated a plan with Tony. He and Tazz had several conversations, with Rumble speaking for me, and Tazz talking for Paul. It was made clear from the start that in order for us to do any business, everything needed to be in writing and there had to be some form of personal responsibility on Paul's part tied into the agreement that would make him personally and financially liable in the event of a recurrence of the Shane Douglas belt-trashing incident. When that became a sticking point, the deal fell apart, and the plans for a reunification match were history.

However, it didn't stand in the way of the one and only legitimate non-televised NWA-ECW angle thanks to then NWA Carolina promoter Greg Price and his long-standing friendship with Mr. Monday Night, the whole f'n show and any other accolades you can put on Robert Szatkowski — Rob Van Dam. Greg and Rob were old buddies, and Rob had worked on one of my shows in Gainesville, Florida, against Brady Boone (as the Firecat) around the time he was starting with ECW. So when Greg asked me to be involved in an idea he had, I was game.

Rob lived in Sanford, Florida, at the time and worked with his old roommate Greg and a guy named Ed Plante to put on a hybrid show featuring wrestlers from both ECW and the NWA under the NWA banner. Aside from Rob and his then ECW tag team champion partner Sabu working singles matches — Rob against Jerry Lynn with Sabu facing "The Extreme Shah" Hack Meyers — also booked were the

reigning NWA world tag team champions the Border Patrol (Tommy Gunn and Mike Long), as well as Bobby Duncum Jr., who would wrestle NWA Florida champ Dory Funk Jr.

Since I wasn't running very frequently at that point I had no problem letting Greg promote an NWA show in my territory. His idea was for me to be ringside for the matches and attempt to lure Rob away from ECW to join the ranks of the NWA. What would follow would set up an NWA versus ECW tag team match the following month.

After Rob's match, I got into the ring with a microphone in hand to ask him if he'd accept my offer to jump to the NWA. Rob said before he could do that I would need to take his "baggage . . . err, I mean partners" — which were Sabu and manager Fonzie, who had now entered the ring behind me. I played it up like I was happy to be getting all three of them, and when Rob said that he would take the deal only after I shook their hands, as soon as I went to shake Sabu's hand . . . pow!

Sabu threw a punch, and I hit the mat like I was dead. He delivered the punch so well between my chin and upper chest that I hardly felt a thing, but it looked so good when I went down that he was worried he had actually hurt me. He stood over me and draped his headdress so the audience couldn't see that he was talking to me. "I didn't hurt you?" he asked. "Are you okay?" Even that little weasel Fonzie had a concerned look on his face.

Although I was flat on my back and looking up at the lights, I told him I was fine. As soon as they heard that they went to work on me. Fonzie started blowing that annoying whistle, and Rob grabbed my legs and pulled me across the ring where they would deliver their signature rolling thunder double-team move. Although he didn't mean to, Rob caught me in the nether regions, and I was in legitimate pain for a while. The ECW tandem kept up the attack until Dory hit the ring to run them off. After the audience calmed down, Dory helped me off the canvas and led me to the back. I'd finally taken my first bump — at the hands of the ECW tag team champs.

Although Dennis was once again a little ticked off, the Japanese press ate it alive, and it made a little buzz on the Internet. Unfortunately, because the crowd wasn't as they expected it to be, Greg and Rob chose not to have a return show, so the Van Dam–Sabu versus Funk-Severn match never took place.

We were once more focused on the NWA 50th, which was now only a few months away.

One of the unlikely people I reached out to in order to make the event happen was my old "friend" George Napolitano, who was the East Coast representative for the Cauliflower Alley Club (CAC). The CAC had held a previous event in New Jersey, and I knew through talking to then president Lou Thesz and members like Gordon

Solie and Sheldon Goldberg that they were looking to do another East Coast event. Sheldon, who was working with Rumble at the time, created the slogan "Tradition Rules" for the NWA during this time of resurgence as a response to the counterculture directions of the WWF with their "Attitude," WCW with their NWO faction and ECW in general. So as a member of the CAC board of directors, I knew Sheldon would support a joint-venture arrangement.

By leveraging the combined resources of the CAC, the WWF and personal contacts, we were able to pull together a who's who of wrestling to celebrate the NWA's rich history and tradition. Although I invited people like Sam Muchnick, Bob Geigle, Dusty Rhodes, Jack Brisco, Gene Kiniski, Verne Gagne, Nick Bockwinkle and a host of other wrestling legends, not everyone responded positively, and, for the most part, anyone who was remotely associated with WCW and ECW stayed away from the event, even though I tried to book Tazz and Sabu.

Despite those who chose to stay away, we had a hell of lineup of honorees and presenters. Some were honored by the NWA. Some were honored by CAC. Most were honored by both. They included Thesz, Solie, Harley Race, Danny Hodge, Freddie Blassie, Walter "Killer" Kowalski and Dory Funk Jr. (who was now working for the WWF and running their training camp called the Funkin' Dojo). Also honored were Severn, Tully Blanchard and Abdullah the Butcher, all of who wrestled on the show that followed the banquet. Among those making presentations were Jim Ross, "Dr. Death" Steve Williams and Cornette, who also served as the master of ceremonies for the banquet.

For the fans who were lucky enough to be present, it was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience because, aside from the honorees who stood in front of a podium to thank their fans, there were a number of current and future stars sitting in the hall. They would appear on the card that followed and included Kurt Angle, Christopher Daniels, Steve Corino, Dr. Tom Pritchard, the Pitbulls, Missy Hyatt, Doug Gilbert, Stevie Richards, Glenn Kulka, Andrew Martin (a.k.a. Test), Giant Silva, Tiger Ali Singh and Pablo Marquez (a.k.a. Babu), Lance Diamond, Devon Storm, Tony Rumble and others.

While all seemed to run like clockwork to the fans, the NWA's 50th anniversary celebration was almost canceled. On the day before the show, while the members were gathering for the annual meeting, which included all of the new members who had joined throughout the year, we were notified that city officials from Cherry Hill had padlocked the door to the ballroom where both the banquet and show were to take place. It seemed an entrepreneurial member of the city wanted to take advantage of what had turned into a high-profile event for the area and decided to institute a new policy that would require a city permit to be purchased

in order to hold the matches. While I initially got upset at Dennis for not getting the permit taken care of, he blew a gasket because, as he explained, of all the shows he had promoted in the city throughout the years, not once did he ever have to get a permit. We were the victims of highway robbery, and the Cherry Hill Police Department held the guns.

Due to the seriousness of the situation, Bob Trobich, Fred Rubenstein (who handled many of Dennis's negotiations) and I were forced to leave the meeting and go to the police station to straighten out the mess. Because we needed someone to put up the money for the permit — I certainly didn't have it, and I knew Dennis didn't — I asked Canadian Wrestling Federation owner Ernie Todd if he would be willing to put it up. I knew Ernie was solvent since he owned a nice-sized trucking company in Winnipeg, and he didn't hesitate to help the organization.

Although in the years that followed many promoters have claimed they would have put up the money if asked, the fact remains that if not for Ernie, the NWA 50th wouldn't have taken place. During the meeting and before heading out to the police station, Dave Teixeira (a.k.a. Dave Republic) of ECCW (Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling) wanted to know why we didn't have enough money to cover the permit considering all the membership funds we had collected during the year. While it might have looked as though someone had his hand in the pot, I was no longer paying my phone expenses out of my own pocket, which for 1998 was about $2,000, we were finally able to pay Bob (about $3,600), plus the organization had laid out a ton of money for the weekend.

Although we were able to solve the issue with the city, when we returned to the meeting some two and a half hours later, we got a report that while we were gone there was some heated discussions going on between Rumble and Behrens, both of who were pretty outspoken and had take-charge personalities. What I found amusing was that behind the other one's back, they each warned me to be careful of the other. Behrens claimed Rumble would be a thorn in my side because he would start an argument and support one stance, but by the time the argument was over he would be supporting the other stance, arguing against himself. Rumble thought Behrens was a bit of a con man and nicknamed him "Southern Fried Savoldi" in homage to Mario Savoldi, who he and I both had less than stellar experiences with.

Still, the initiative both showed while I was gone was enough to get the membership to vote them onto the new board of directors. Although in keeping with kayfabe, to the public we never listed Rumble as being a member of the board as he insisted we list Victoria Van Ellen, which was actually the gimmick Tony's wife Ellen Magliaro used in her role as an NWA New England official. I was promptly re-elected as president.

You would think the whole episode with the city would be enough of a headache for one weekend, but it wasn't.

Aside from the accusations levied against Dennis and the fact that Tod Gordon left before the show started, neither Too Cold Scorpio nor Barry Windham, both of who were booked through the WWF office, showed up. Scorpio we later found out no-showed because of his loyalty to ECW, and Windham, who was scheduled to team with Blanchard in a four corners match for the NWA world tag team title, had left the WWF to sign with WCW.

But even the no-shows paled in comparison to the fact that William Regal, who was hand-picked to face Dan Severn because of his amateur background, was so spaced out on painkillers that he wrestled with his boots on the wrong feet. A match that was only supposed to go 14-minutes went a painfully long 31, with Severn trying to get Regal to "go home" for much of the contest. After the match a furious Jim Ross lambasted Regal for his unprofessional display and warned him that if he showed up on Monday night at the WWF's TV taping in a similar condition he would find himself without a job. On Monday night, J.R. kept his word, and Regal was promptly dismissed.

But not everything about the show was a train wreck.

There was a fun moment when the 1970s flashed before everyone's eyes. After Abdullah finished his match and was heading back to the dressing room, he confronted Harley, who was sitting at the back of the ballroom watching with J.R. The two of them briefly got into a scuffle, until Race chased off the "Wildman from the Sudan." The crowd ate it up.

Right after intermission, Thesz and Kowalski climbed into the ring together and went to opposite corners as if they were going to face each other. Instead, Thesz grabbed a microphone and praised his former opponent. When he was done, it was Kowalski's turn to make Thesz shine. It was as if they were working a match with words instead of wrestling holds. I remember Jim Cornette grabbing me saying, "Howard, get them the hell out of the ring. These fans are going to be brutal." Jim thought the mostly younger Philly-based ECW "smart" fans wouldn't appreciate the two legends or what they represented. And since Kowalski was so hard to understand because of his rough voice, Jimmy thought the crowd would be merciless. Instead, when they finished cutting their in-ring promos, the 700 or so fans gave them a standing ovation. It was a rare misjudgment for Jim, but a nice way for the fans to pay homage to a part of wrestling's past.

By the beginning of 1999, not only was the NWA's deal with the WWF essentially over, but so were the hopes of an NWA pay-per-view (PPV) featuring the ladies of wrestling. In mid-'98 Tor Berg, the owner of the LPWA and my former rival in

ladies' wrestling, contacted me about doing an angle with the NWA brand on his planned PPV for the beginning of the following year. By the time we were off the phone, Tor had joined the NWA and had agreed to re-brand the LPWA as the WNWA, in similar fashion to how the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) was a brand extension of the NBA. Part of the deal would include his company controlling the WNWA title, me having input into the booking of the PPV and the NWA getting a percentage of the PPV revenues for the use of the brand. Because Tor already had a great track record for shooting television and presenting a PPV (1992's *Super Ladies Showdown*), the arrangement seemed viable. But one day Tor just disappeared. Vanished. Neither I nor Music City Wrestling's Bert Prentice, who worked for Berg in the LPWA as "Queen" Christopher Love and who had also been speaking to him about helping him book the PPV, heard from him again.

While Bert and I were scratching our heads to the whereabouts of Tor Berg, the month of February brought about a new direction for the NWA. Victor Quinones called me about Antonio Inoki wanting to book Dan Severn in Japan against Naoya Ogawa for UFO.

Dan and I met at LAX and were greeted not only by Simon Inoki but by a member of the Japanese press, who was there to cover the meeting between Dan and the Japanese wrestling legend. We were taken to the Los Angeles Athletic Club, where Inoki had previously no-showed the scheduled meeting with Hiro Matsuda. But this was different. This time Inoki was waiting — instead of someone asking him for something, he was asking for the favor.

Inoki was intrigued by the idea of a working relationship between the NWA and UFO. At the time I didn't know just how strong NWA politics had actually been in Japan, and I didn't realize that Inoki had coveted the NWA title for years. But because of his rivalry with Shohei "Giant" Baba, the prestige of an NWA relationship was always out of Inoki's reach — until now. With Baba passing away just a couple of weeks before our meeting, Inoki was warm to the idea of putting the NWA title on Ogawa, with the understanding that at some point he would have to reciprocate by putting the title back on Dan, most likely at the NWA's next anniversary show, which would take place in Charlotte several months later. One thing Inoki agreed to, prior to the title switch, was that either he personally or his organization had to put up a $10,000 performance bond, which would guarantee the safe return of the NWA title back to the organization.

Although Inoki was fluent in English, for the most part he spoke only Japanese at the meeting with Simon doing the interpreting. However, when he wanted to assure me personally that the bond would be put up prior to the match in Yokohama, he acknowledged it to me in English. He also told me in English that

when the time came for Ogawa to give the NWA title back to Dan it would "once again have prominence in Japan."

The Japanese press jumped all over some of his comments. "Dan Severn is a great martial artist and an extremely strong wrestler who deserves to be called world champion," Inoki was quoted in one of newspapers following the announcement of the partnership between UFO and the NWA. He continued, "Yet, he is severely underrated by the U.S. media. By matching Severn against top UFO fighters such as Naoya Ogawa and Don Frye, we can restore the value of the NWA title in honor of my friend, Giant Baba." Inoki would end up dedicating the March 14th event in Yokohama to his longtime rival.

Some of the online press thought the arrangement was good too, pointing to the possibility of UFO fighters participating in NWA events in the U.S. and Canada. Even though the exact combat styles were somewhat different, both organizations prided themselves on tradition, which would mean fans could expect to see some exciting matches in the upcoming months.

In my mind, getting Inoki into the fold was a major coup for us, and part of the deal I cut was making him a member of the NWA board of directors. However, some members of the board and the organization in general didn't like that I broke protocol by naming Inoki to the board without him being voted in and without my even consulting anyone first. But for the most part the critics kept their mouths shut because they understood that it was for the greater good of the organization. Besides, with my vote and the two board proxies I held, I could pretty much push through whatever I needed to as long as I had at least one other vote from the sitting board — and for the most part Bill Behrens would support whatever measure I put forth as long as it didn't compromise the organization. Better than anyone else in the NWA, he understood the importance of bringing Inoki on board.

Part of the deal of Severn doing the job for Ogawa was that I would travel to Tokyo with him to award the former Olympic silver medalist the belt after the match. Once they bought my business class plane ticket, however, I would learn that I would be doing a great deal more once I got to Japan.

Although Dan departed from Detroit and I left from Tampa, we met up in Seattle for our connecting flight to Tokyo. To say I was surprised to see photographers at the airport to meet us when we arrived in Japan would be an understatement. I didn't realize just how big of a deal it was for Dan, a mixed martial arts (MMA) legend, to be facing one of Japan's national sports heroes.

Once there, Dan and I were immediately put to work, holding a press conference, which was a bit ridiculous as UFO figurehead president Satoru Sayama staged a debate over the use of open gloves, which resulted in the match being "canceled"

only to be "saved" by a special NWA envoy that was being deployed, who would also serve as the special guest referee for the match — longtime All Japan Pro Wrestling competitor Dory Funk Jr.

A lot had happened in the five months between the NWA's 50th anniversary weekend and the March show in Yokohama. Dory's arrangement with the WWF to run their dojo came to an end, and after hearing that I had arranged for an NWA world title match in Japan, the Funks approached me to see what I could do about getting Dory somehow involved.

Although the Severn-Funk heat was still remembered by the Japanese press, UFO did not want to capitalize on it. Instead, when I brought up Dory's name with Simon, they came back with the idea of Dory being a special referee, especially since the show was being dedicated to Baba, for whom Dory worked for many years. In addition, there was a certain mystique between Funk and Inoki as they had wrestled to a very famous 60-minute time limit draw back in 1969 — which they still sell on DVD in Japan today — and their 1970 return match also went to a one-hour time limit draw. In 1972 a return match was scheduled between the two, but, just prior to the match taking place, Inoki announced he was quitting Japan Pro Wrestling and forming New Japan Pro Wrestling. Funk eventually went with Baba, who formed AJPW, and a rematch never took place. It was my understanding that when they shook hands at the Yokohama Arena backstage before the show it was the first time in nearly 30 years that they again stood face-to-face.

Dory had his own press conference when he arrived, during which he laid out the ground rules for the match and saved the day. . . . The match would go on as scheduled. After Dory delivered the information to the press, he and Marti invited me back to their room for a quick meeting. When I got up there, they handed me an envelope. In it was cash. I can't remember if it was $1,000 or $1,500.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's your booking fee," Dory said.

"Booking fee? I don't need this," I said, trying to give it back to them.

"You deserve this," Marti said, shoving the envelope back in my hand. "This means a lot to Dory."

I looked at her husband and studied his face. I could see Marti was right that the appreciation was genuine. I realized that the last time Dory had been in Japan he hadn't left on the best of terms with Mrs. Baba — when his position as the gaijin booker had been transitioned to Johnny Ace. For him to return to the place where he was still revered as a wrestling god had to be a bit humbling.

Realizing that any attempt to give the money back would be insulting, I put the envelope in my jacket pocket. "Thank you," I said. (And it's not as though I couldn't

use the extra cash. At the time that money represented two or three weeks' pay.)

On Saturday morning Dan convinced me to take a little walk. We just walked and talked as he led me up into the hills of Yokohama to a beautifully secluded Buddhist temple. I hadn't realized just how far we had walked until I saw our hotel rising from the Yokohama skyline in the distance. Late that afternoon Dan and I were called to Inoki's room at the Shin Yokohama Hotel, where I watched Dan, Inoki and Ogawa work out the finish for the match that would take place the next afternoon. While I thought it was odd that they did this away from the building, I would learn that in Japan they still practiced a pretty high level of kayfabe, and at the arena, aside from a quick photo opportunity I would have with them, Dan and Ogawa wouldn't even see each other until they stood in the ring together. I thought it odd that they actually walked through the match, move by move, including the finish, right there on the hotel room carpet.

After the little session was over, I reminded Simon that I needed the $10,000 performance bond from his father-in-law, and the look on his face told me that it was one detail the Japanese office had forgotten about. They were so busy with everything else they were doing for the show that they had neglected to secure the bond. Simon didn't panic, but he did come across nervous.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Just make sure everything is in order by match time," I said.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't starting to sweat. I had heard all sorts of stories about Inoki supposedly double-crossing the WWF years earlier, and I began to wonder if I wasn't being set up. I knew I could not leave Japan without that bond, and I certainly couldn't let the match go on unless I had it in my hands before the bell rang.

If I left Japan without the bond or the belt, the members of the organization would have my head.

The next day Dan and I were picked up at the hotel and driven the short distance to the arena. We were greeted by Simon, who pulled me to the side and told me they were working on the bond but were finding it hard because it was Sunday and the banks were closed.

I told Simon that without the bond I could not let Dan drop the title to Ogawa, so he had better get together with his father-in-law to come up with another finish for the match.

Once inside, I saw Dory and privately told him what was going on and that there might be a last-minute change in the finish. I also brought Dan up to speed. Dan was cool as a cucumber.

Before long the show started, and although Dan and Ogawa had about 90 minutes

before they would meet at center ring, there was still no bond. I was nervous and pacing the halls. Simon finally showed up and told me they couldn't secure the bond and asked me if we could go ahead as planned and told me they would straighten out everything the next day.

"That's not what we agreed to Simon," I reminded him. "I cannot leave here without the bond or the belt. You'll have to change the finish."

"We can't," he said. "There's not enough time."

I was frustrated and finally drew a line in the sand. "Well then, I guess we'll really find out who the better wrestler is. If this is not resolved by the time Dan heads to the ring, it's going to be a shoot."

As Simon walked off to try to resolve the issue, I went back to Dan's locker room.

"Well?" he asked. "Is everything taken care of?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Dan, can you take this guy?"

Dan raised an eyebrow, knowing what I meant. "If I have to," he said. "But will we get out of here in one piece?"

It was a good question and not one I had thought through.

While we were discussing our options, a knock came at the dressing room door, and it was Mark Coleman, another MMA guy who was over in Japan. Mark worked for one of the other shoot companies and was there to say hello. I could tell Dan was not in the mood to talk as he was preparing himself mentally in the event that he would be going out there and shooting with Ogawa instead of working with him.

As match time approached, Simon finally showed up and asked me to follow him to see Mr. Inoki. Simon led me to a private meeting room where Inoki was gathered with a number of businessmen.

When I walked in, Inoki turned around from the person he was talking to and said, "Please, we need the match to go on as scheduled. I promise I won't fuck you."

I got a creepy feeling as I scanned the room, not exactly sure who these people were. At first I thought they might be corporate sponsors, but some of them struck me as not exactly having that "corporate" look. Then I remembered what Al Kahn had said in Las Vegas about Bandai claiming that Inoki had ties to the *yakuza*. All of a sudden, it hit me why Hulk Hogan was so concerned that Inoki was involved with Hiro. Although I didn't know for sure, my gut told me these people were exactly who I suspected they were.

"How the hell am I going to get out of this?" I asked myself. Then I remembered something Hiro had told me about old school Japanese businessmen:

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Sharing a laugh with Simon Inoki during the UFO after-show party at Yokohama Arena

contracts mean nothing, the most important bond is a man's word and his handshake and agreements are only as binding as the men behind them. With that I stuck out my hand to Inoki.

"Just give me your word and your hand that you will have the bond for me before I leave tomorrow, and you have my word that Dan will do what he is supposed to do."

"I promise you," Inoki said as he took my hand. "You will have it tomorrow."

"Then we are all set," I assured him.

When I left the room, I let out a nervous sigh. Simon then led me back to Dan's dressing room, as it was time for his match. I let Dan know to go ahead and put him over as planned.

Right before being led down to the ring, where I would deliver a proclamation, I gave Dory the sign that all was good.

The match took place, and as agreed Naoya Ogawa became the first Japanese-born wrestler to become NWA world heavyweight champion since Keiji Mutoh (a.k.a. the Great Muta) as he forced Dan to tap out with his Spinning-Octopus. Inoki delivered on the promise that he would bring the title back to Japan.

After all the matches were finished, Inoki had an after-show party for the workers in an arena banquet room. I recognized several of the dignitaries, and before mingling with them, Inoki came up to me and again thanked me. For the most part I stayed with Dan, Dory, Marti and a few of the American wrestlers who were on the tour. I also had a brief conversation with Simon, who admitted to me that Ogawa was scared of Dan, not knowing if their match was going to be a shoot or not. Whatever tension had been between us was gone. Simon again assured me I would have the bond in my hand in the morning.

The next morning as everyone prepared for their departure, Simon came to the hotel to get Dan and me to take us to the airport. However, he did not have the bond with him. Instead, he told me a guy named Shintaro Sawano, who worked

in the UFO office, would be bringing the bond to me at the airport. (He would later manage several MMA fighters in Japan including Kazuyuki Fujita.) I didn't like that answer and began wondering if I was going to be screwed.

During the drive my curiosity got the best of me, and I asked Simon if the people who were with Inoki at the arena were members of the *yakuza*.

"Yes, I think so," he said somewhat confidently. But then, after a few minutes of thinking about what he said, he recanted. "Maybe," he said, now a bit less certain of his assessment. Then after a few more minutes of contemplation he admitted, "Actually I'm not quite sure." It seems Simon had the same conjecture I had, and while his initial gut was to say "yes," he didn't know for sure the suits were members of the *yakuza*.

After being dropped off at the airport and with time ticking away, I was certain that I would be leaving Japan without the bond. Just about ready to give up and check in for my flight, I heard a voice through the crowd. "Mr. Brody . . . Mr. Brody!"

I turned and saw Sawano making a beeline to me.

Thank God!

"Do you have the bond?" I asked.

"No bond," he said. My stomach turned to a knot. "Here." He handed me a bank envelope. When I opened it, I saw there were one hundred brand new one-hundred-dollar bills inside. It was as if they had come right off the press. Instead of a bond, he was giving me $10,000 in cash. There I was at Narita Airport, right by the passenger entranceway with no security except for Dan standing by me, counting $10,000 in cash. After I verified the amount, Sawano then took out a paper and had me sign it as a receipt acknowledging the acceptance of cash in lieu of a bond. Because the paperwork was in Japanese, for all I knew I was signing a bill of sale for the belt, but it wasn't. Despite all the stress, Inoki had kept his word.

After arriving home, I started getting grief from some of the members because rumors began circulating that I had personally been given $10,000 by Inoki. Of course the money wasn't mine. Even though I had to fill out IRS paperwork when coming back into the States to show that I was carrying more than $10,000 in cash, I converted the money into postal money orders and immediately sent them to Bob in Charlotte.

One of the people who busted my chops more than anyone else was the late Tony Rumble. Tony grew frustrated that I was able to strong-arm my ideas and policies through the board without a great deal of debate because of the proxies I held and began accusing me of having a puppet administration, which in a sense was right. Tony made such a stink in public forums that the organization adopted

what some of us in the NWA referred to as the "Rumble Amendment," which basically barred one member from bad-mouthing another member of the organization in a public forum. Anyone who violated the decree could potentially face membership termination. Tony got so frustrated by my attempt to muzzle him that he resigned from the board.

Eventually his concern about one member having too much power was incorporated into the NWA bylaws, and voting powers were limited to two votes, the member plus one proxy. Prior to that, any member could hold several proxies, which I did pretty consistently, holding proxies at one point from Steve Rickard, Victor Quinones, Danny Davis from OVW, Andre Baker from the United Kingdom and Inoki.

Even though I kept Tony's indignation, for the most part, in check, he made my life pretty miserable for a while by screwing around with the NWA world tag team titles. When the NWA New England team of the Brotherhood (Eric Sbraccia and Knuckles Nelson) won the titles — at the NWA 50th in a four corners match against defending champs the Border Patrol, the duo of Kit Carson and Khris Germany (a.k.a. Team Extreme) and the team of Tully Blanchard and Dr. Tom Pritchard (who subbed for Barry Windham) — it was understood that several months later they would drop the titles to Carson and Germany who worked in Texas for NWA Southwest's Ken Taylor.

The problem was, because Tony thought I was playing political games with the NWA board, he decided to play games with the titles and did all sorts of things to avoid removing the straps from his territory, like missing a booking, claiming Team Extreme won the New England tag team title instead of the world tag team title and things like that. Tony was rebelling against me, and although he had an unorthodox way of doing things, he actually brought a lot of attention to the tag team title at the time.

At one point during our rift, Rumble and I didn't talk for a few months, but we eventually buried the hatchet, and I even had him involved in a semi-controversial finish for the world heavyweight title. The Brotherhood eventually dropped the straps to Team Extreme in Charlotte, North Carolina, as part of the NWA 51st anniversary show.

Three months after winning the NWA world title from Dan Severn, it was time for Naoya Ogawa to make the first of his two trips to the U.S. to defend the title. Aside from the headache of securing his work visa, which delayed his trip from May to June, his tour took a lot of coordination on my part to ensure he would appear on as many member shows as possible in the short time he would be in the States.

The majority of active promoters stepped up and booked the champion to

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Ogawa's first title defense in the U.S. was against former champ Dan Severn

appear on their cards, including Behrens, Miller, Taylor, Rick O'Brien in New York and the two guys who made the biggest stink about him getting the strap in the first place, Dennis and Rumble. The rest of the promoters either didn't have shows booked for the days he was available or decided to pass on Ogawa, feeling he would not do them any good at the box office — not exactly a show of good faith. While Dave Republic wanted to bring Ogawa to Canada and we looked at trying to coordinate a flight to Vancouver before he would head back to Japan, the logistics didn't work out. Despite the few hiccups, it was a team effort to bring him over and get him on NWA-branded shows. While UFO paid his way between Tokyo and L.A., the members split the bill for his U.S. travel, which made it cost-effective. There were two casualties in the bookings, Miller in Pittsburgh and Rumble in Boston.

While Ogawa made it just fine to Dallas for his rematch with Dan, mechanical issues prevented his plane from making it to Pittsburgh, and he missed his title defense in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, against Brian Anthony. Hoping we would attempt to get Ogawa rebooked for him and in an effort to save face with his crowd, Miller had Anthony declared the winner of a match against a local wrestler

who pretended to be Ogawa, thus allowing Anthony to lay claim to the world title. Of course the NWA didn't recognize the "title change," but we ended up leveraging the angle for the anniversary show a few months later.

While Ogawa made the rest of his bookings, including matches against the likes of Biggie Biggs, Doug Gilbert, Gary Steele and even Swedish kickboxer and then WAKO (World Association of Kickboxing Organizations) world champion Fredrik Hjelm, he also missed his booking in Boston thanks to another delayed flight. But instead of Rumble complaining, he was able to turn Ogawa's late arrival into a great photo opportunity that generated a lot of publicity. Always one to take advantage of his connections, Rumble was able to stage a pull-apart confrontation between Ogawa and local high-profile boxer "Hurricane" Peter McNeeley, who was perhaps best known for his 1995 fight with "Iron" Mike Tyson, in which he was knocked out by the champion just one minute and 29 seconds into the first round.

Rumble, who had been so against Ogawa initially, started warming up to the idea of a Japanese champion, especially since about 40 Japanese fans had shown up to his event just to see Ogawa and had been exposed to his brand of wrestling. Sheldon had created a poster specifically geared toward the local Japanese community and had it translated into Japanese. It paid off, as Tony realized he could tap into a whole subculture of potential new fans. Suddenly he believed that having a champion who had a certain mystique was a good thing. And even though Ogawa missed his match, he was gracious to the fans that showed up to see him and posed for photos with every one of them. By having a world-class athlete like Ogawa as champion, it made the NWA seem a little more legitimate than perhaps if an independent wrestler carried the title. Too bad Rumble's realization came a few months too late — I really could have used his support early on, but better late than never.

During his U.S. tour, Ogawa took a liking to Steele, who had a martial arts background, and booked him for a rematch in Japan on a UFO show a couple of months later. At the time Steele was a mainstay for NWA Hammerlock, the United Kingdom–based NWA member, and he just happened to be in the U.S. at the time along with a number of British wrestlers shooting a documentary that Behrens was helping with.

Because of the newly forged relationship between Ogawa and Steele, and the fact it was becoming increasingly difficult to book Dan in pro wrestling matches because his MMA schedule was so full and he needed extra time to train, I ended up booking a match for the NWA 51st in late September between Ogawa and Steele, and I threw Anthony into the mix as he continued to claim he was the champion. It turned out Anthony was the perfect distraction for the match because literally at the 11th hour I decided we would switch things up and put the belt on Steele, but

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

NWA champ Naoya Ogawa poses with NWA New England owner Tony Rumble

just for a week. Even though I initially wanted it to be an Ogawa-Severn rematch to top the show, the triangle match was actually better because Ogawa was scheduled to wrestle the following weekend for Tony up in Boston. Since Rumble hadn't set an opponent for Ogawa yet, the surprise title switch would work perfectly, and Tony was wide open to accept the match, especially with the NWA footing the bill.

A few hours before the show I asked Steele if he could stay in the States for the week with us picking up the difference in his airfare and his hotel costs. I thought he was going to faint when I told him why. At first he didn't believe me and thought it was a rib. I explained to him that we needed an element of surprise for the show, and he would be it. I suppose Steele finally realized it was no rib when Behrens helped him, Ogawa and Anthony lay out the match for later that night.

The match itself wasn't half bad, as it was basically Ogawa versus Steele with Anthony playing the part of the pest. The finish had to be done in a way to keep Ogawa strong, so we had him use his Spinning-Octopus finisher on Anthony, and as soon as Brian tapped out and Ogawa got up from releasing him, Steele schoolboyed the champion for the three-count and became the first-ever British-born NWA world heavyweight champion. The Ogawa loss caught the Japanese press in attendance completely off guard, and even prompted Abdullah, who was on the

card, to question if the finish was an accident, asking me if Inoki knew "his boy was doing the job?"

A week later in Thomaston, Connecticut, at an NWA New England show, Ogawa took the strap back from Steele when Rumble accidentally hit Steele with the helmet he often wore. The guy who, perhaps only next to Dennis, yelled the loudest about Ogawa getting the strap, "helped" him take the title back to Japan. It took about a year, but "Southern Fried Savoldi" was right about Tony Rumble — he started on one end of an argument, and when it was all over he was arguing the point from the other side.

It seemed Rumble loved controversy. Right around the anniversary show, he filed a complaint against NWA Northeast owner Michael O'Brien for trying to run a show in Connecticut, which was part of Rumble's territory. Although there was no specific rule against running in another member's territory, you either had to get the member's permission to use the NWA brand or run a non-branded show; O'Brien chose the latter. However, Rumble claimed that O'Brien had gone right after one of his show sponsors — a local fire department — and had bad-mouthed both him and his company in an attempt to take a paid show away from him. Although I tried to resolve the issue on my own, neither Rumble nor O'Brien thought I would be fair in my assessment of the situation, so I asked Ernie Todd to step in as an impartial mediator. Because Ernie had shown his willingness to help the organization back in Cherry Hill, both O'Brien and Rumble believed Ernie could be objective and rule fairly. After hearing both sides of the dispute and weighing all his options, Ernie concluded that NWA Northeast had done financial harm to NWA New England and ruled in Rumble's favor, ordering O'Brien to financially reimburse Rumble for lost income. Despite agreeing beforehand that he would abide by any ruling regardless of its implications, O'Brien refused to comply, and instead of paying Rumble he promptly quit the organization.

On November 13th, several weeks after his Connecticut show, Rumble passed away from a massive heart attack. Sadly, Ellen Magliaro blamed Rumble's death on O'Brien for many years, claiming that it was the stress and aggravation over the paid shows that caused the heart attack.

Shortly after Rumble's death, Ellen appointed Knuckles Nelson and Jeff Katz to run the wrestling operations for her. Knuckles was one half of the Brotherhood tag team, while Jeff was a staple of Boston radio who had primarily been Tony's ring announcer and then television play-by-play guy. The appointment came as a shock to me, as I had thought the natural choice would be Sheldon Goldberg.

A few months earlier, around the time Rumble and I had our beef, I laid into Sheldon pretty heavy on the phone one night when I found out that Rumble wasn't

paying him for all of the work he had been doing. Shelly not only built and maintained the NWA New England website, but he designed all of their show flyers and posters, tickets, handled all their publicity, including the writing of their press releases, and he even worked on show proposals. Shelly did anything Rumble asked. Although Shelly made and sold the NWA New England merchandise and for the most part kept the profits, he still wasn't compensated for the rest of his hard work. So when I questioned Shelly on why he continued to work for a guy who didn't appreciate him, Shelly's response was "it's an investment. A piece of that company is mine."

"Do you have it in writing?" I asked.

His response was, "I don't need it in writing. I trust Tony."

But apparently Shelly took what I said to heart because the next day I got a call from an irate Tony Rumble. He was so angry that if we would have been face-to-face he probably would have popped me. I will never forget the first words out of his mouth when I answered the phone.

"How dare you try to turn my partner against me! Who the fuck do you think you are?"

I tried to mount a defense, but Rumble would have none of it. He made it perfectly clear that Shelly was his business partner, and when I brought up having something in writing Tony made it clear, "My word is all Sheldon needs."

While I will say that Tony Rumble was a stand-up guy when it came to honoring his word, who knew that he would pass at such a young age? When Ellen appointed Nelson and Katz she told me "Tony would never choose Sheldon Goldberg in a hundred years to run his company."

Although Shelly was devastated by the slight, in hindsight it was the best thing that could ever have happened to him. Less than a year later, Shelly formed his own wrestling company, New England Championship Wrestling, and as I write this NECW is the top independent promotion in New England having announced a major regional television deal with Comcast SportsNet New England that will begin in January 2010, while NWA New England, which later became NWA Cold Front, went out of business in 2008.

While Nelson and Katz tried to help Ellen at first, Jeff was offered a new radio job in Las Vegas and after moving away would no longer be involved. Knuckles, meanwhile, tried to carry the load for a while, but he realized he couldn't handle the duties himself and that the financial return for his hard work wasn't enough for both he and Ellen. When he finally quit, Ellen appointed Jason Della Gatta to take over — he had been dating her daughter.

To honor her husband, Ellen asked Jason to take Tony's last name and even

went so far as to give him the helmet that Rumble used to wear to the ring. Jason, like most of the guys who worked for Rumble, revered him and was honored by the request. In accepting the designation, Jason adopted both the Rumble and "Boston Bad Boy" monikers and was billed as Tony's son.

When Hiro passed away two weeks after Rumble, I became introspective. Ring Warriors gave me the creative outlet I needed, and now I no longer had that. Realizing that it might be a good idea to lead the NWA by example, I had already put all the pieces in place with the right people to begin running shows, but I seemed to be dragging my feet. I wanted to run monthly shows in Tampa; I just had to figure out where I would run them and how I was going to pay for them.

A few months earlier — around the beginning of June — the Funks had been approached by a local Ocala businessman named Martin Yoffe, who had shown a slight interest in investing in a wrestling company. Yoffe actually wanted to invest in pro boxing and contacted the sports editor of the *Ocala Banner* newspaper, Vince Murray, seeking advice. Vince explained to Yoffe that to put on boxing shows in Florida, he would need a license, have to pay fees and taxes to the state athletic commission, deal with doctors, fight managers and a whole slew of other headaches. Vince suggested that instead of investing his money in pro boxing Yoffe consider pro wrestling and recommended he speak with Dory and Marti.

At the time I was still pretty tight with the Funks, and since they didn't have their wrestling company up and running yet, they sent Yoffe my way, knowing that I wanted to start running monthly shows. Martin was a hell of a nice guy and very open about his intentions. With a background in real estate and construction, while he liked that the Funks spoke highly of me and kept a positive attitude, he found the prospect of investing in pro wrestling itself highly speculative. Before he was willing to put in a dime, he wanted to see some projections — a spreadsheet of estimated expenses and anticipated income over a three-year period.

I did due diligence, and to make the package more lucrative, I brought one of my mentors, Gordon Solie, into the fold. Although Gordon had not yet revealed it to anyone outside of his family, he had been diagnosed with throat cancer. To the casual observer his voice sounded like he was suffering from acute laryngitis. Unfortunately, it was much more serious. Still, Gordon came on board to help me close the deal.

The three of us had a dinner meeting at a small Greek restaurant near Gordon's home in New Port Richey, Florida. After all the niceties and small talk were out of the way, Yoffe said he thought my business plan and projections were unrealistic, calling them "wishful thinking." He felt the potential reward that could be realized from putting on shows was not worth the financial risk. However, because he liked

the enthusiasm Gordon and I showed and thought there was potential for nurturing business through the paid show route — provided we had the ancillary support items required to pursue that avenue — he agreed to put up the money we needed to create the various materials. So we made full-color brochures and mailed them out to schools, trade shows, county fairs and anyone we could think of in Florida who could potentially want to buy a show, and we waited. And we waited. And after a while we waited some more. While it would take time to follow up the mailers with phone calls, the process wasn't satisfying my itch, as I still wanted to pursue the monthly shows and began looking for a way to make that happen.

At the beginning of October I released a statement on Gordon's behalf. Gordon and his family were pretty ticked off because, unfortunately, the way the statement read sounded as though Gordon was throwing in the towel, and he wasn't. A few weeks later, Gordon's old buddy at the *Tampa Tribune*, Tom McEwen, broke the story and laid out Gordon's three choices: do nothing, keep smoking and using the hard stuff and be gone forever in six months or less, have radical surgery to keep his voice as is with satisfying results at about 30 to 40 percent or surgically remove all the cancer in his 71-year-old throat, the voice box with it, with a 90 percent recovery chance but give up speaking. As McEwen put it, Gordon was an old horse player and chose the option with the best odds. So, trading in his voice so he could live, November saw Gordon undergo radical surgery.

Despite the surgery, Gordon was back on his feet in no time and attended Hiro's funeral at the end of November. His appearance shocked a number of people, not because he was there to pay his respects, but because he was still recovering from his own health issues. In time, Gordon would be his old self again, and he eventually had an artificial voice box put in, which he loved to play around with. The first time he called me he pretended to be a computer because that's exactly what he sounded like. But when Gordon wanted to be serious he would be. Between faxes, emails and face-to-face meetings, we communicated just fine, and the plan to move forward with doing monthly shows was not deterred. Even though Gordon did not have a voice, he recognized that his name could be a big benefit to us.

By the beginning of 2000 there were rumblings of a new organization getting ready to start called WXO, owned and operated by a guy named Howard Lipkint, who had been the executive producer for Paul Alperstein's now defunct American Wrestling Federation. Steve Keirn had hooked up with Lipkint, and, before I knew it, Lipkint's name started coming up in conversations I was having with different people.

Eventually Lipkint and I would be put together, and he was open to a working relationship between his new startup and the NWA, but he was quite gun-shy. In his eagerness to put a deal together, Lipkint started speaking to Steve Karel of Stonecutter Media, who was representing ECW and would eventually become their managing director, while he was in serious negotiations with The Nashville Network (TNN). Unfortunately Lipkint, who was dealing in good faith with Karel, disclosed a bit too much about WXO's potential deal with the network that would eventually become Spike TV, and as such screwed himself out of national television distribution deal.

While ECW appeared to hit a homerun by taking the deal out from under Lipkint's feet, it actually turned out to be bad karma for them, as the financial strain of paying to be on the air each week ultimately put ECW in the poorhouse. Lipkint could have made the deal with TNN work because he had sponsors lined up to offset the cost of being on the air, something ECW was never able to do. Lipkint's deal included TNN putting up the majority of the initial costs, thus reducing his own out-of-pocket expenses. Because Steve Karel knew this, his deal with TNN didn't require any out-of-pocket expenses because ECW was already producing television, so on paper the ECW deal was better for the network.

When the deal with TNN went south, Lipkint tried to regroup and go the route of syndication by going market-to-market, again leveraging advertising dollars to offset his costs. Despite having nearly 70 percent of the U.S. households cleared through syndication and shooting four weeks of television in mid-June, the financing that was promised to Lipkint fell apart and threw him into a personal tailspin that took him years to recover from.

So, while Howard Lipkint was planning his first WXO television taping, by May I decided that if I couldn't get an investor to put up money for my project, I would try to underwrite the cost of running shows myself. However, without knowing my building expenses, I didn't know how much money I would need to come up with. During my search for a facility, I was coming up short as I wanted a place that held between 1,000 and 1,500 people but wasn't a high school gym. I felt that while a high school gymnasium was fine for a small town that didn't have a large population, for a major city like Tampa I had to run a building that meant something in order to be taken seriously. The Florida State Fairgrounds where I booked ECW was perfect, but they wanted almost $2,500 rent and didn't want to commit to a long-term deal.

Then, one afternoon, Gordon asked me about the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory. I hadn't considered it. We both knew wrestling had been banned from the building since the early '80s, when a group of overzealous wrestlers trashed one of

the offices that was used as a dressing room, but to our knowledge nobody had ever attempted to go back there, assuming the ban was still in place. With nothing to lose, I reached out.

Bruce Odiorne ran the facility but was not a member of the National Guard. He was a citizen hired to rent the Armory to third parties like me for events ranging from boxing matches to collectors' shows, but, as suspected, wrestling was on the verboten list. However, he didn't know why it was banned. The colonel who had run the facility prior to him had left a list of approved events. When I asked if he could lift the ban Bruce told me the only one who could do that was the general, who was stationed in Tallahassee. Although he was reluctant to do so, he gave me the general's name and number.

Surprisingly, the general got right on the phone. He knew nothing of the ban, didn't know why it had been put into effect in the first place and since the commander before him didn't leave any notes detailing the reason for it, he was happy to lift it. When Bruce got word from headquarters that it was okay to run wrestling he was shocked, saying that whenever he had been approached to do a wrestling show the promoter immediately gave up trying to rent the facility after hearing there was a restriction in place. He said I was the only one who had gone the extra mile.

As Bruce got the paperwork ready, I had to come up with the money to run the show — about $6,000. I also needed a support staff. Although Martin Yoffe agreed to support me by working the box office the night of the show, he was not willing to lay out the cash. Instead I contacted David "Slim" Baucom, the NWA promoter from Charlotte. Slim, who had initially backed Greg Price, had taken over the territory after he and Greg had a falling out, and through an agreement Baucom ended up as the owner of NWA Carolinas, which he changed to NWA Mid-Atlantic. Rather than investing in my show, Slim agreed to lend me the money with the understanding that I would pay him back when I had it, with no timetable attached. He understood that if I made money I would roll the profit into the next show and so on and so forth.

Still needing a support staff but wanting to keep costs down, I decided to bring in a couple of partners who would provide sweat equity. Frankie Reyes, who had worked for Malenko back in the day and was tapped into the local talent base since he and his son-in-law Dominic Traina ran local shows at a little bar in town called Kahuna's, would be my booker. Ray Blackburn, who was the only guy I ever trusted to rent a ring from, would not only provide the ring and guardrails, but he would handle the merchandise. Although I was reluctant to bring him in at first, Frankie convinced me to bring in Dominic too, as he would handle everything from box office and security to building cleanup after the event and provide the

corporate structure for our Ticketmaster account.

With all the pieces in place, I signed a contract with the building, and on August 15, 2000, after almost 17 years in exile, pro wrestling was slated to return to the historical Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory with an event that would be billed simply as Back to Tradition! Although the contract couldn't stipulate that I had an exclusive on the building, what I did have was a clause that no other wrestling show could take place in the building 30 days before or after my events. To keep any other promoter from coming in, I locked in dates for 18 months, which would take me through February 2002. The only way a date would be canceled is if the National Guard needed the building for drills, which ended up happening more frequently than I liked, but it ensured the building was mine until I gave it up.

In keeping with the tradition of the building, instead of running on the weekend like every other independent promoter, I chose to run the shows at the Armory on Tuesday nights, which historically was when the old Florida office ran. I wanted to bridge the gap between what was and what could be as much as possible.

To make the night special, I wanted to honor some of the greats that had wrestled in the building previously, and we were going to have a special meet and greet with Gordon, who would sign autographs at the front of the building as people entered. I even publicly invited Hulk Hogan back to the place where he got his start to burn the WCW title in the center of the ring — on July 9th he had been disrespected at WCW's Bash at the Beach, when Jeff Jarrett controversially laid down in the ring to put him over for the title without actually wrestling him. Needless to say, Hogan didn't show up.

As for Gordon, unfortunately his health took a turn for the worse, and on July 27th, one month prior to the show, he passed away. It was an emotional kick to my stomach, but it lit a fire under me to ensure we had a great crowd.

The building was set up to hold 1,000, which was the maximum capacity as determined by the Tampa Fire Department. The building had changed dramatically since the days of the old Florida office, when it was configured to seat 5,000 or more.

The night was emotionally charged to say the least, as I had attempted to honor as many of the legends who came through that building as possible. And in a moment of overwhelming sentiment, I simply lost it when ring announcer Mark Nulty mentioned Hiro's name during the 10-bell salute as he read the many names of those who had passed on.

There were a number of old timers who accepted my invitation, including my good friend Danny Miller. Also in attendance were Karl Von Stroheim, "The Batman" Tony Marino, Buddy Colt, who would become my commissioner effective

the following show and two of Gordon's children, Pam Allyn and Jonard Solie. I also did special in-ring posthumous presentations to Dory who was there to award the NWA Florida title to the winner of a tournament to be held later in the night (accepting on behalf of his father Dory Funk Sr.), as well as Greg "The Hammer" Valentine (for Johnny Valentine) and Joe Malenko (for the Great Malenko). We even did an angle between Valentine and Malenko, who bad-mouthed each other's fathers, to set up a match between them for the next show in September. George Scott, Angelo Poffo and Jack Brisco turned down my invitation, as did Mike Graham, who I think felt a little resentful that I was running a building that was synonymous with his father's legacy.

The card itself was a mixture of old and new, and I was going to get heat from somebody regardless of who was on the card and who would be put over. While technically Frankie was my booker, he booked the undercard, and I had him work with Dory on the finishes. There was a lot of really good local talent I completely slighted for the initial show, but I did it for a specific reason.

Ron Niemi, who ran a group called IPW Hardcore in St. Petersburg and who I was pretty friendly with, was ticked off at me for not booking any of the guys he used regularly, including Scoot Andrews, Mike Sullivan and the Shane Twins. All were very good workers, perhaps some of the best in the state at the time, but I explained to Ron that while I eventually would use them, because I was charging $10, $12 and $15 for my tickets, I couldn't put the same people on my card as he was using until I established my brand. He simply didn't understand, or perhaps he didn't want to listen to my reasoning, that I didn't want my fans to feel ripped off if they could go across the bay to see the same workers on his card for $8 or $10.

Even though four workers he used regularly were booked, two of them were there to do jobs — Chris Tipton and Larry Brannon (a.k.a. Chris Nelson and Vito DeNucci) — and two of them worked under different ring names. Leroy Howard, who worked locally as the Navy Seal, worked for me under the gimmick Rastaman, which he used exclusively in Puerto Rico, while Barry Horowitz stepped back in time and recreated his Jack "The Stretcher" Hart persona, who had the distinction of setting an all-time record for most consecutive loses. We kept the streak going.

The top of the card would feature two tag team matches.

On this particular night Rick Michaels and David Young (a.k.a. Bad Attitude), who worked for Bill Behrens in Georgia, would take home the NWA world tag team titles from a team called xXx (pronounced triple X), which was comprised of Curtis Thompson and Drake Dawson. However, Dawson couldn't make the booking for personal reasons and was replaced by Jeff Justice for the night, even though we announced him as Dawson.

The other tag featured B. Brian Blair and Steve Keirn against Luke Williams and Butch Miller (a.k.a. the Bushwhackers), who I had reprise their Sheepherders gimmick for the night and play the heel team instead of the babyfaces they had been doing in the WWF. Aside from using them to help trigger a Blair-Keirn feud, my intention was to bring Luke and Butch back to build a new babyface tag team. However, when I found out that they had complained to their opponents about their payoff and actually told them what they were making, which was twice what I was paying Blair and Keirn, Luke and Butch immediately moved to my "Never to Be Booked Again" list. Luckily Blair and Keirn understood why I had paid Williams and Miller more than them and never once complained as their feud would headline the next several shows.

Their angle was so hot that it had all 850 paid fans out of their seats and on their feet as Keirn turned on his longtime friend, leaving him a bloody pulp. Keirn came across so violent in getting old school heel heat that he even bloodied one of the paramedics who came to ringside to help Blair to the horror of the crowd. Little did the fans know that the paramedic was local wrestler Frankie Rose, who was a real paramedic. Although the angle went long, as none of the babyfaces in the back knew when to hit the ring and clear it out, it was the one thing on the card that was reminiscent of the old territory.

I did catch some heat, however, when Keirn, who was wrapped up in being a heel, called an African-American fan at ringside the N-word. I didn't know anything about it until the next morning, when a coworker of mine who was in attendance informed me. I didn't like hearing it. I felt racism and foul language were not necessary to garner heel heat. I was even more upset when the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) contacted me. The incident prompted me to immediately enact a zero tolerance rule for such behavior effective with the next show. Anyone violating my decree would forfeit their pay for the show and never be booked again. I made sure this policy was understood by all participants before each show going forward.

Then there was the NWA Florida heavyweight title tournament, which was probably the biggest booking blunder I ever agreed to.

Dory and Marti convinced me to put the strap on one of their students, a 19-year-old greenhorn named Adam Bryniarski, who wrestled under the name Adam Windsor. Along with a couple of other students, Adam had become the star pupil of Dory's Funkin' Conservatory, which was basically the Funkin' Dojo concept he created for the WWF but with a different name. Although he was a really good kid and always treated me respectfully, Adam had never worked against anyone except for Dory and his other students, and then only in a school environment. It was

essentially his professional debut and, in hindsight, a boneheaded decision on my part, but I liked the idea of creating a homegrown star. Plus, with Dory giving his seal of approval on the kid, I figured he could handle it. I thought he would be a wrestler who could go into every match as the underdog and eke out a win. My philosophy was to build his reputation as being the king of the territory, in the same fashion Lawler built his reputation in Memphis. Even though I did not have TV, my plan was to pattern my live events after how Memphis was booked, with each live show being self-contained and feeding the next show.

Because Dory was the current Florida champion, he forfeited his belt so a new champ could be crowned, and after Adam won the tournament, Dory turned right around and challenged his student for the belt. The challenge set up the classic teacher versus student contest, with Dory claiming he had taught Adam everything his student knew but not everything he knew. Also, by Funk putting Adam over in the center of the ring, it would legitimize the kid's title so he wouldn't be seen as a fluke.

In the meantime, while things were unfolding with Adam, Ogawa had surrendered the NWA world title on July 2nd, claiming an injury and had sent the belt back. Once the belt arrived, safe and sound, the NWA returned $6,500 of the $10,000 to Inoki for self-insuring the belt. Although Bob Trobich was supposed to secure a surety bond, which would have cost about 20 percent of the face value, he was never able to get that done, so with Simon Inoki's understanding and agreement, the NWA deducted the fee that would have been spent before returning the balance.

Although there was not enough time to book a tournament to crown a new champion for my August show, when I couldn't find another promoter willing to host it, I stepped up and booked it for my September show, making the announcement before the end of the August show. While I was reluctant to have back-to-back tournaments, I felt the allure of the world title would be enough to offset any negativity associated with booking another one-night tournament, plus the quality of the participants would most likely be superior to what was offered for the Florida title.

Upon announcing the September 19th tournament publicly on the NWA website on August 16th, I received an unlikely call from someone who wanted in — ECW's "King of Old School" Steve Corino. Because my philosophy was to always book one show ahead so I could announce the main event of the next show before the end of the current one, Steve caught me a little off guard. My initial plan for the eight-man tournament was to book a couple of legends, a couple of ex-NWA world champions, a couple of regional champions from the organization, plus Dan Severn, who would win it. When I suggested to Steve that I bring him in the following

month to face the newly crowned champ he balked. When I told Steve that booking him for the tournament would mean that he would have to do a clean job, he said he didn't mind as long as he won his first round match against one of the legends, thus continuing his "King of Old School" rep, but lost in the next round to the person who would win it. Since Steve had come from the NWA and I liked the idea of having an ECW representative on the Tango in Tampa 2000 card — a spin on the famous the Last Tangle in Tampa event that took place 20 years earlier in Tampa Stadium and featured Dusty versus Harley for the NWA world title — especially one who embraced tradition as part of his gimmick, I went for the idea and booked him.

I also received another call about the tournament from Marti Funk. The colorful Mrs. Funk tried to convince me to cancel the Windsor-Funk match and instead book Adam for the world tournament with him winning it. When I explained to her that the members of the organization would not go for it as they wanted a champion who had some name recognition and who could potentially draw a crowd, she became offended and said there was nobody in the tournament who was as qualified as Adam to be champion and proceeded to knock the whole field. When I told her I understood her position and that she and Dory shouldn't push the kid too soon because he was too young, Dory got on the phone and reminded me that Lou Thesz was only 21 when he won his first world title in 1937. I stood my ground; Marti got back on the phone and personally offered me $10,000 cash to change my mind. She wasn't offering the money to the organization mind you — she was offering it to me! While it was quite tempting, I refused and suggested we concentrate on the Florida title that Adam held and how we could boost his value.

With the discussion on Adam closed the eight slots were all set: Severn, Corino, Valentine and Malenko, NWA national champion Kevin Northcutt and former Florida champions Hector Guerrero, David "Fidel" Sierra (a.k.a. the Cuban Assassin) and Kendall Windham. Unfortunately the lineup was not set in stone.

Shortly after announcing the brackets for the tournament, I received an email from Paul Heyman, asking me to pull Steve Corino. This led to a phone call between us during which Paul told me he couldn't have Steve participate in my tournament because, unbeknownst to Steve, he had planned to make him the ECW world champion. As such, he didn't want Steve doing the job for anyone, especially someone who might go on to become the NWA world champion, as it would harm the mystique of the whole ECW counterculture movement. While my first inclination was to tell Paul to screw himself, he and I never really had any personal heat, aside from the money he owed me. I thought about how the title could help Steve

in the long run, provided Paul was actually telling me the truth. Paul confided in me that ECW was hurting financially, that his overhead had skyrocketed and that, because he was in the midst of trying to get new financing, he didn't want any perceived chinks in the ECW armor.

I contacted Steve and told him what Paul had told me. Steve was shocked and thought Paul was full of crap and that this was just another story in the long line of Paul Heyman fabrications. However, Steve said he would agree to pull out of the tournament if Paul gave him the guarantee of the title and made it known to him. And so through a series of emails between Paul, Steve and I, Heyman agreed to give the King of Old School the ECW strap at his next PPV provided he pulled out of the NWA world title tournament.

As part of the agreement, I announced publicly that I was letting Steve Corino out of his commitment in order to pursue the ECW title, and on November 5th in Villa Park, Illinois, at the November to Remember ECW PPV, Paul lived up to his promise as Corino captured the title from Jerry Lynn.

Corino would not be the only casualty of the tournament. After committing to participate, Dan Severn pulled out so he could concentrate on training for a big UFC payday. According to Dan, while he wanted to participate, one of the clauses of his contract prohibited him from participating in any event prior to his UFC fight. This meant we now had to find someone to take his place as NWA champion. Of those who were already booked for the tournament, none would be a first choice to carry the strap.

During a series of conversations with Bill Behrens, we agreed that the best representative might be the "Colorado Kid" Mike Rapada, who had held the NWA North American title for most of the past few years. Unfortunately, Mike wasn't the North American champion at the time, Chris Harris was, so five days before he would win the NWA world title, Rapada recaptured the North American title so he would enter the tournament as a champion.

There would be one more change to the lineup as Northcutt dropped the National strap a week before the tourney to a big, bulking man the size of a building who wrestled for Behrens under the name Stone Mountain. So Dan, Steve and Northcutt were out and Rapada, Stone Mountain and WCW journeyman Jerry "Lightning Foot" Flynn were in.

Two days before the show I heard from Malenko that he couldn't wrestle due to aggravating an old back injury, while the day before the show I got a message from Valentine's wife that he had to be out of town due to personal issues. The eight-man tournament had been whittled down to six. I decided not to fill the two spots and instead go with the lineup I had.

The first round of the tournament saw Windham and Stone Mountain battle to the back in a double count out, with Rapada beating Guerrero and Flynn besting Sierra. Because of the double elimination, we went right to finals with Rapada topping Flynn. After Rapada won, while he was holding up the belt, Sabu hit the ring to attack the new champion, setting up Rapada's first title defense.

When I called Sabu to book him for my October show, he wanted to participate in the tournament, but I had already filled all the spots. Then he suggested I book him on the undercard, where he could set up an angle with Rapada, but I didn't want to push my budget out of whack. Because the show was on a Tuesday night and he had no other bookings, he agreed to come in for a song and dance to help boost the card he would headline with Rapada the following month. One of the first things out of his mouth was he wouldn't put Rapada over clean, and he wanted to win the NWA title because his uncle had never achieved that goal . . .

Meanwhile, the Windsor-Funk match ended as planned, with Adam pinning his mentor. After the match Adam was challenged by another of Dory's students, a local kid from Lakeland named Brent Cameron Dail. While Brent was a good-looking kid, he was even more of a novice than Adam, and I didn't like the idea of Adam working against no-name challengers, as I specifically wanted the NWA Florida champion to put together a series of victories over name opponents. But Dory and Marti seemed to have other ideas. Dail was recommended to them by Gerald Brisco, and with a great amateur wrestling background, he was being groomed for greener pastures. His main problem, however, was that he was overshadowed by his then girlfriend, Summer Rain, who accompanied him to the ring. Summer had a great athletic look, and every time she stood with him, he seemed to get lost in her shadow. It was the same effect that Rena Mero (a.k.a. Sable) had on her then husband, Marc, but on a much smaller scale.

Because I was so wrapped up in the world title picture, I pretty much looked the other way and let Dory book the Florida title how he saw fit. However, I made it a point to tell him exactly what I wanted and that after two matches with Dail, Adam had to start working with guys that I wanted to push like Jason Seguin (a.k.a. Buck Quartermaine, which I would soon shorten to Buck Q and make the leader of a group of Florida junior heavyweights called the Tampa Clique). Dory agreed to go in that direction.

At the next Armory show, titled OctoberSLAM, not only did I see my relationship with the Funks start to derail, but I got to see the debut of a tag team that initially started out as a joke, the New Heavenly Bodies ("Casanova" Chris Nelson and "Vivacious" Vito DeNucci) managed by "Gigolo" Jimmy Del Ray.

After the August show, Frankie started bugging me pretty steadily about

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

The New Heavenly Bodies were anything but a joke

booking Chris and Vito as a tag team, telling me the gimmick they were doing at the time, Drunk and Disorderly, was a great concept. The problem was they were working under that gimmick for Niemi. So one night at Steve Keirn's school, Frankie brought it up again, and I went off on him saying "No fucking way!" I did not want to have a team called Drunk and Disorderly on my shows, and I told Frankie the only way they would ever be on a card of mine as a tag team is if they were to do a gimmick called Clean and Sober, at which Jimmy, who was within earshot, started laughing. Seeing that he enjoyed the joke, I added, "Hell, why not just make them two slobs and call them the new Heavenly Bodies?" Of course I said this because Jimmy had been a member of the Heavenly Bodies with Tom Pritchard; he was smiling from ear to ear, and Frankie started laughing too.

"That's not bad," Jimmy said, shaking his head as if it would work.

"What's not bad?" I asked, knowing what he might be getting at.

"I think that could work," he said.

"Seriously?" Frankie chimed in.

"Yeah," he said, dead serious.

I started thinking about it. "Will you manage them?" I asked him.

Jimmy smiled, shaking his head in a wishy-washy motion. "Yeah, I'll do it," he

said. "I think it'd be fun."

And so, as a rib on Chris and Vito, the New Heavenly Bodies were born. But little did I realize when joking around that night that my offbeat humor would lead two really good guys and hard-working independent wrestlers down a path that would take them to three reigns as NWA world tag team champions.

On their debut night, Chris and Vito were supposed to work against and be put over by Barry and Kendall Windham. However, Barry had taken ill while in Puerto Rico the weekend before, so instead they were put over by Kendall and the Cuban Assassin, who were both working for the same office in San Juan at the time. What was interesting about this particular match was for one night David became the Cuban Patriot and worked as a pro-American babyface. All it took was a two-minute in-ring promo by Sierra about a hot local topic and David saying how proud he was to be a Cuban-American living in the greatest country on Earth, and just like that — *snap!* — one of Florida's all-time biggest heels, who used to spew anti-American venom and talk like he and Fidel Castro were bosom buddies, was now leading fans in a chant of "USA! USA!"

While the New Heavenly Bodies were in the ring being christened, I had to go outside to get some fresh air, so I walked to the back of the building. The Armory got very hot, even during October, but there was a cool, secluded spot near the staircase that led upstairs to the dressing rooms. Often the wrestlers would stay in this little area to go over their matches. As I walked through the curtain and into the little holding area, I was hit by an unmistakable aroma — the distinctive smell of ganja!

The culprits were my main event opponents, Mike Rapada and Terry Brunk (a.k.a. Sabu). I thought I would faint. Here I had about 500 fans in the building and cops crawling all over the place, and Albert Einstein and his sidekick were sucking on a blunt.

"Put that shit out!" I said, seeing them pass the joint between them.

Sabu let out a puff of smoke and extinguished the joint against a wall.

"What the hell is the matter with the two of you? There are cops all over the place."

"We're just getting to know each other," Mike said, thinking nothing of the fact that they were breaking the law.

"I just want to know which of you geniuses brought that shit. Is that Nashville's finest or Detroit's finest?" I asked, referring to their hometowns.

Sabu and Rapada glanced at each other simultaneously, as if on cue. "It's Ocala's finest," said Sabu. "Marti Funk gave it to us."

Fuck!

I was hot at them and I was hot at Marti. I really didn't care if they smoked pot

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Even though they fought over the NWA world title, Sabu and Mike Rapada enjoyed a special bond

or not, but they shouldn't have done it at the building. You want to smoke, do it on your own time, after the show. This was my time, and their actions put my show in jeopardy. Their so-called bonding ceremony did lead to Sabu putting Rapada over clean when the time came a couple of months later, but there was no excuse for what they did. As for Marti, what she did was simply irresponsible, and since a strain had already started in my relationship with her and Dory because of a difference in philosophy, I felt she was purposely trying to undermine my show by affecting the performance of my main eventers.

When I approached her about it after the show and away from her students, in an attempt to avoid any possible embarrassment, she shrugged off what I was saying . . . blew it off like it was no big deal. I was disturbed, and I made sure she thoroughly understood that.

To make matters worse, the match between Adam and Brent really showed their limitations. This concerned me because their match was setting up a Texas Death Match for November, which would be one of the three matches that would comprise a triple main event, with the other two being Rapada versus Sabu in a return match and Keirn versus Blair in a cage to blow off their ongoing feud.

Prior to the Night of Decisions card, Dory called me and asked for 45 minutes for the match between Adam and Brent. I was reluctant, questioning whether or not the two could handle something like that. When Dory assured me they could, I looked at the rest of the lineup I had slated and thought I could make the show

work in a three-hour window, so I agreed to give Dory the time but told him we may need to scale back, depending on what happened earlier in the show.

During the week prior to the show I had lunch with Brian Blair, Steve Keirn and Buddy Colt, as I wanted their opinion on the direction I was going. I felt something was missing at the shows, and at my request to give it to me straight, the three lit into me. All three agreed that Adam was too green to be carrying the Florida strap, and Buddy suggested I go with this guy Kevin Donofrio, who had been wrestling under the name Cyborg. While Buddy said he might have been green too, he felt Kevin at least looked the part of a wrestling champion and could be built the way I had initially wanted to build Adam, by putting him over name opponents.

While Buddy was telling me this I thought back to the time I had met Jim Barnett at one of the Funks' training seminars in Ocala. Dory and Marti had asked me to come up to see talent as a way to show their students that they were being looked at by different wrestling organizations, in my case the NWA. It was more show than anything else. It was at that seminar that Barnett and I talked about Windsor's abilities and his moniker, the Royal Stud. Barnett's assessment of Adam was "I don't know if he knows how to be a royal stud." He then said, "I think he has a lot of learning to do, and I don't know if he will ever learn how to be that."

One could say a lot of things about Jim Barnett, but he knew a thing or two about promoting and recognizing and evaluating talent. He wanted to be nice, but he didn't see it in Adam, and I turned a deaf ear to him. I didn't want to make that mistake again.

I agreed with Buddy's observation, and I listened intently to what both Steve and Brian were suggesting I do with some of the other talent, including Kevin. Also, when I told them that Windsor and Dail would be going 45 minutes, Steve begged me for them to go on in their cage match before the two kids because he felt they would stink the joint out. Brian looked at me like I had three heads and asked me why I would put two unproven talents on for so long. When I told them it was Dory's idea, Buddy chimed in and told me I was losing control of my own shows. They were right. I was being played by the Funks, and I needed to put my foot down.

A few days before the show Marti called me to ask how everything was going as it pertained to ticket sales, and I told her it was as usual. We were going to have between 500 and 600 in the building for the show based on what we had presold and drawn previously. While I had her on the phone, I took the opportunity to have her give Dory a message from me that the match between Adam and Brent would follow the Rapada-Sabu world title and Blair-Keirn cage match and be the last match on the card.

Marti had a cow. She did not want Dory's students to follow two "drug addicts" as she referred to Sabu and Rapada or a cage match that would be filled with blood. Marti Funk turned downright mean and ugly. When I told her that Adam and Brent could go on before Sabu and Rapada but after the cage match, she continued to blow a gasket. I asked for Dory and after ripping into me, Dory finally took the phone from her.

I told Dory about my concerns, and when he said, "A cage match is always the last match on the card," I agreed with him. While that's what I had initially planned, I not only confessed my concern about the abilities of his students in holding the attention of the crowd, but I shared with him the concerns of fellow wrestlers Brian Blair and Steve Keirn.

After some back and forth discussion, Dory made it clear to me that he understood my position, and while he didn't agree with me or my decision, he said he would abide by my request. I thanked him for working with me, and we ended the call. When I hung up I thought the issue was resolved, and the discussion was over. I was wrong.

The next afternoon I received a call from Steve Keirn. Steve had had a change of heart and asked to be put on last. Why? Marti had gone on the warpath and took it upon herself to call Steve shortly after I got off the phone with Dory. She threatened Steve by saying she would tell his wife about some of his exploits from his younger days.

"She's crazy," Steve said, obviously upset at the turn of events, "And to be honest, I don't need Terri [his wife] asking me about something I did or didn't do 20 years ago — I don't need this crap."

I was shocked that Marti would do such a thing, and when I called to confront her for meddling, she not only made a veiled threat about following through on her promise to call Steve's wife, but she made it sound as though Dory and Adam would be pulled from the show too. While that probably would have been the best thing that could have happened, I couldn't put Steve through that and I gave in.

"Fine," I said, wanting to end the confrontational attitudes that had been boiling over the last couple of days. "I'll see you and Dory at the show." That was the last time we spoke until the day of the show.

One would think that after several days of not speaking that tensions with the Funks would have subsided quite a bit and everyone would go out and do their best. They hadn't. To make matters worse, I started getting feedback from some of the undercard wrestlers, who were questioning why the Funks had been getting special treatment. Unknown to me, Dory, Adam and their Funkin' Conservatory students weren't using the same dressing room that everyone else was using and

instead were getting dressed in the camper Dory and Marti drove down from Ocala. I never realized this because usually I would be in the arena and not hanging out in the dressing room. However, at the beginning of each show, when I would give my dressing room talk, I would always see them. I also started hearing tales of poor locker room etiquette and demeanor by Adam and the rest of the Funk students. I was losing control of my shows and needed to take them back. This night would be a turning point.

As the show went on, it was just about time for the final three matches on the card, and we were running about 25 minutes long because of a late start and two of the preliminary matches running a little long. Because the show was on a Tuesday night I wanted it to end no later than 10:30; I figured three hours was long enough to be there. Our shows normally ended at 10:00 and if we were lucky 9:30. So, with this in mind, I went to Dory and I told him to cut the Texas Death Match to 20 minutes instead of 45. At first he didn't say anything, but I could see on his face he was questioning me.

"The show's running long," I said, "So at around the 15-minute mark, Nulty [the ring announcer] will give you the 'go home' sign. You'll have five minutes to wrap it up. Okay?"

"Okay," Dory said, acknowledging my instructions.

The Adam Windsor–Brent Cameron Dail match started, and when it did I went to the back to tell Sabu and Rapada they would be on earlier. The first 10 minutes of the match was actually very good, but by the time they hit the 15-minute mark both Adam and Brent were starting to be repetitive, and you could sense the crowd was eager for an ending. As far as I was concerned, it was a smart move to shave the match down to 20 minutes, but Dory had yet to call the go home.

At the 20-minute mark there were still no signs of it ending, and Brian Blair was coming apart at the seams. "Howard, get them the hell out of the ring," he called out to me from where he was watching the match on the second level balcony.

Buddy Colt, who was standing next to me, said, "They're killing your house," and he was right. As I stood there watching Dory in the ring with his two students, fans were starting to get out of their seats and walk out the side door of the building. They were so bored by the match that they weren't even going to stick around for the two main events.

Like an idiot I kept waiting for Dory to have them wrap it up, but at 30 minutes nothing had happened. I had seen enough as one-third of my crowd walked out of the building. I sent our three referees, Frankie Reyes, Adam Reyes and Spanky Malone, to the ring to stop the match and get them the hell out of there.

I had Mark ring the bell and announce Adam Windsor as the winner, and I had him immediately announce the two remaining matches on the card.

Thinking quickly, Sabu came up with a plan to start the match backstage, and even before Dory and his students were out of the ring, Sabu and Rapada started tossing around garbage cans and chairs backstage to create noise and make a commotion to draw attention away from the ring. Within seconds Sabu and Rapada started fighting down the aisle toward the ring, and as soon as Dory saw them, he got his students out of there.

When Dory and Marti (who had been at ringside shooting video) made it to the back, Marti was hot, wanting to know what happened and why the match had been stopped. Dory seemed pissed too but stayed cool about it. I was so angry I didn't even want to see them. Marti kept asking me why the match was stopped. I ignored her and kept walking away from her.

Since I usually gave the talent their pay envelope right after their match, I handed Dory his pay — $300 which covered him, his students and the sound system that the Funks provided as that was our deal — but he gave it back to me.

"I don't want to take your money if you were unhappy with the match."

I took the envelope back without question and stuck it in my pocket. "Unhappy? Dory, 200 people walked out of the building during that match, couldn't you see that? You agreed to go 20 minutes. I finally sent the referees in at the half-hour mark. What the hell were you thinking?"

Dory just stood there with a blank look on his face. I was disgusted and walked away from him. Meanwhile, in the heat of her anger, Marti instructed her sound person to dismantle the sound system and pack it away, obviously not allowing us to use it for the final match. I went to the ring and told Mark Nulty to finish up the show the old fashioned way, which he did.

The Funks and their entourage left the building, Brian Blair won the steel cage match against Steve Keirn, thus giving him the Florida tag titles, and Sabu went on to capture the NWA world title from Rapada.

Between my full-time job, trying to run the NWA and attempting to keep some semblance of a home life, it was hard enough for me to promote shows every month. I certainly didn't need people who were going to throw hissy fits every time something didn't go their way.

Although I was angry at Marti, I blamed Dory for what had transpired in the ring and the effect it had on the fans. Aside from the fact that he had lied to me when he agreed to trim the match time down, he should have had enough sense to see what was going on in the building and called for the "go home" earlier than planned. Although he tried to justify his actions after the fact by saying Adam and

Brent had worked out a 45-minute match and wouldn't know how to cut it down, his explanation actually supported my argument rather than his own. They were just too inexperienced to try to pull off a match that long. It's not as though we were talking about Jack Brisco and Harley Race. These were two greenhorns who didn't have the skill set required to capture the imagination of the crowd. All Dory did was solidify my feeling that he had no respect for me whatsoever and had his own agenda.

Things got pretty ugly. When I demanded the return of my Florida belt, the Funks took the position that it was Dory's to do with what he pleased and that I had given it to him as a present. I hadn't. I had just followed the standard practice of the business by letting my champion hold possession of the belt while he was champion. Before the NWA 50th anniversary show I didn't have a Florida belt, but I was able to work out an arrangement to get one made, and I surprised Dory with it in New Jersey. That was three years earlier. Now that Dory was no longer my champion and I had broken my ties with the Funks and their school, I simply wanted my belt back. They refused to return it. I ended up having Bob Trobich represent me in an attempt to get it back and even threatened to sue them if they didn't comply. The Funks turned around and threatened me with some ridiculous countersuit, and after a number of exchanges between our attorneys, Bob made the recommendation to drop pursuance of the belt and move on. It bothered me, but I followed his advice.

During our exchange, while Dory kept a low profile, Marti threw a number of pointed remarks my way, and in turn I said some pretty nasty things about them, even doing so in a public forum, the NWA website. Aside from poking fun at Dory's advanced age, saying he shouldn't be wrestling at 137, I would also describe Marti as a female version of Satan, wondering when she had stopped taking her Prozac. Looking back, what came out of my mouth was mean-spirited and wrong. I regret not taking the high road. And for the sake of historical accuracy, Dory wasn't 137 years old at the time — he was 59.

I was so mad at the whole situation that I swore off working with the Funks forever. Pro wrestling is notorious for being a business in which you "never say never," and I knew that at some point my anger would subside and I would probably want to reach out to the Funks to do business again. I wanted to ensure that would never happen, so I had to make a promise to myself that I knew I would never go back on. Taking the lead of Jim Cornette, who had once sworn on his mother's grave that if he ever saw Mark Madden again, a Pittsburgh-based newspaper columnist, sports commentator and radio personality who once worked for WCW, that he would kick his ass (and he has since lived up to that promise), I swore on my

parents' graves that I would never work with the Funks again.

However, I've since reached out to them. In 2004, while working with Dusty Rhodes on *Dusty: Reflections of an American Dream*, I contacted Dory to see if he would be willing to provide a courtesy quote; in exchange, Dusty would provide the same if Dory ever decided to write his own book. It should be noted that a number of people in the business provided comments about Dusty, ranging from Terry Funk to Tully Blanchard to "Superstar" Billy Graham to "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. Not one of them asked for anything in return. The only person I asked who wanted to know if they would be paid for participating was Dory, and when I said no, he refused.

Even with that attitude, I tried to make amends with the Funks. In 2005, at Greg Price's NWA Legends Convention in Charlotte and long after I had forgiven Dory and Marti for all the aggravation they had caused me five years earlier, I attempted to make peace. For the first time since the exchange of nasty emails, I spoke with them face-to-face. I offered to take them to lunch so we could talk; I told them I hoped we could let any ill feelings pass. While I still had no intention of ever doing business with them, I figured that if we were going to come across each other at different functions we might as well be civil and cordial. But instead of accepting my olive branch, all the bad feelings were dredged up. I made the mistake of thinking of them as friends. They only looked at me in a business sense, which I discovered when Dory finally spoke his mind rather than let Marti do all the talking for him.

"It was never about friendship," he said to me. "It was always only about business."

They might as well have spit in my face.

I couldn't understand what it was about them that turned every seemingly good relationship they had into something bad. Through the years I had heard that it was Marti who had cost Dory a number of business relationships, including deals with All Japan and the WWF. I even caught wind that Adam Windsor and his family had a falling out with them over money. Being the curious fellow I am, I contacted Adam.

Adam was candid with me. He said the relationship began breaking down when the Funks couldn't deliver on their promise to get him into the WWF. Adam's parents had given them well over $100,000 to train and manage Adam's career and everyone was frustrated when it stalled. Windsor wanted to begin working outside of Ocala, Florida. Adam told me that when his parents decided to cut off the cash flow, the Funks turned on him. He no longer had favorite pupil status. It was time for them to find a new favorite.

One of the themes Dusty wove throughout his book was that when it came to the wrestling industry "business is business." So when Dory said to me that "it was always only about business," all of a sudden I got it. The phrase had nothing to do with the business versus friendship mentality I had. I didn't feel so bad any more. If it was truly always only about business with Dory and Marti, then there never was a friendship there in the first place. I no longer owed them anything, including any type of apology.

I told them I was sorry they felt the way they did, and I finally took the high road and wished them luck.

But back at the end of 2000, that mindset was not yet in place, and the November disaster sent shock waves through my promotion. While I gained back the respect of my locker room by removing the perceived cancer from our midst, my partners and I had to rebuild our credibility with our fan base. When 200-plus people walk out of your building because they're unsatisfied with your product, it's hard to get them to come back.

Despite having a solid lineup for our December show, which included a Rapada title defense against Sabu and the New Heavenly Bodies (NHB) facing Blair and Cyborg, our paid attendance was down almost 300 people from the previous show, or roughly $4,000 off at the gate. For an independent show, $4,000 can be make or break.

Right after the December show I was thinking of pulling the plug on the January 23rd date to give myself some time to regroup. But I was contacted by the class president of a local high school who wanted to do a fundraiser for his graduating class. Stephen Favata, who was a regular at our shows, was a member of Chamberlain High School's wrestling and baseball teams and was captain of the latter. After sitting down with him to see what exactly it was he wanted to do, and then sitting down with the school's principal, we decided that instead of doing the fundraiser at their school, we would do it at the Armory. It would still be their show, and it would be a guaranteed payday for us, but by having it at the Armory they could take advantage of our regulars who would attend.

We stacked the card with talent, as we had Blair and Cyborg facing Keirn and "The Dog" Al Greene, Sabu and Rapada teaming to face Horace Hogan and a mystery partner (who turned out to be Dan "The Beast" Severn) in an angle that had started in December when Hogan attacked both during their match with a steel chair, and the continued building of both the NHB and Lex Lovett, who I started looking at to be not only the NWA Florida junior champion but the NWA world junior heavyweight champion. Like the majority of the guys in my dressing room, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do that was asked of him. I also started

pushing Buck Q as the new NWA Florida champion, and with Bucky I could finally do what I had wanted to do with Adam and build up a champion. The January show also saw the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory debut of Steve Corino as he showed up to challenge the world champion. NWA Florida commissioner Buddy Colt promptly told the King of Old School he would grant him a title shot at the next show if he could win a handicapped match against two opponents; he did.

Even Favata wrestled his first match on the card, against his baseball coach, which he won by cheating thanks to the help of heel Buck Q, a graduate of Plant High School, an archrival of Chamberlain. After the victory, Favata removed his Chamberlain T-shirt to show that he was wearing a Plant shirt and had changed allegiances. (The reason I mentioned that it was Favata's *first* match, and not simply "a match," was that Stephen was so taken by the experience that he not only ended up heading my street team to promote future shows, he started training under Steve Keirn and Jimmy Del Ray. He would eventually debut under a ring moniker that I chose for him, named after the high school I went to in New York. Favata has worked on the independent circuit as well as for the WWE's Florida developmental territory and for a couple of promotions in Japan, including New Japan Pro Wrestling as Steve Madison.)

We did what we had to do to rebuild our fan base, and for the most part everybody pitched in. Although I took over the booking from Frankie, in time I also made some changes in the partnership arrangement as Frankie and Dominic Traina were out, and Vito DeNucci and Chris Nelson were in. Vito also started working with me on the booking and handling of talent. He knew the direction I wanted to go, shared a similar vision and took some of that burden off my shoulders. He, along with Nelson, would also be the one to make peace between Niemi and I.

From a financial perspective, Kevin Donofrio and Brian Blair helped tremendously by getting friends to buy tickets for every show. Kevin really went the extra mile for me, however. Owning a gym in Brandon, he would buy an advertisement in our program for every show, plus he would get friends who were business owners to buy ads too, and whenever I tried to give him his cut, he would always hand the money back to me, telling me he just wanted to help. Half the time he wouldn't even take his pay. It was actions like that, plus the way he looked, that prompted me to finally make him Florida champion when the time came.

On the talent side, we had an interesting mix of veterans and younger workers. Buck, Lex and the Bodies became my personal responsibility as far as exposure and recognition went. Cliff Anderson, Hack Meyers, Tommy Dreamer and Chris Candido were all brought in to put Buck over in his build for a world title shot. In

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

A bloody Buck Q, flanked by manager Fonzie and financial advisor Mark Gold

July, Vito and I put together a 12-man tournament called the Super Junior Open to make Lex Lovett into a ring stud. Although it was some of the best wrestling ever in the Armory, the crowd was horrible. As for the NHB, Chris and Vito took a rib and turned it into a career, and their dedication by going to the gym and getting into shape impressed me so much that I lobbied heavily for them to be the new NWA world tag team champions. Just as I did with Buck, I brought in teams as fodder for Chris and Vito, including the duo of Jason Sugarman and Jorge Estrada (from Dusty's Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling) and, from New Jersey, the highly touted Backseat Boyz (Trent Acid and Rico Casanova who subbed for Johnny Kashmere who was touring Japan) plus their manager, my old pal Donnie B.

The shows started taking on a bit of a special atmosphere — we frequently had guests show up because I had an open door policy to those who were in the business. Sometimes it would be wrestlers who worked the old Florida territory, like Mark Starr or Denny Brown. Sometimes it would be some of the WCW or WWF guys who had the night off, like Billy Kidman or Jamie Noble (who actually worked a show and put over Lovett). Sometimes it was guys who were more known for their work in Japan, like Wolf Hawkfield (a.k.a. WCW's "Jungle" Jim Steele), who helped Steve Keirn in his angle with Blair. One night my old buddy WCW

announcer David Penzer showed up and just for kicks did the introductions for a world title match — which made our regular ring announcer a little jealous.

Even the IPW feud made our shows unique. We started working together, executing a storyline that was carried over between the two companies. While Ron made the IPW versus NWA Florida feud the focus of his shows, for the shows at the Armory it was a secondary storyline that had influence at the top of the card, as IPW had a hand in determining both the NWA world tag and world junior heavyweight titles. We started interchanging and aligning some of the workers between the groups, and it worked so well that not only did *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* do a multi-page feature on the feud, but Bobby Rogers (Mike Rapuano), who ran a group called FOW (the Future of Wrestling) in South Florida, wanted in to the mix. Reluctantly, Ron and I agreed to let FOW join, but the focus was almost exclusively IPW Hardcore versus NWA Florida.

I had known Bobby since he was a kid trying to break into the business, and while he came off as being a bit smug and smart-alecky, he was always very respectful toward me. Bobby had built a pretty good following of fans in the Miami–Fort Lauderdale area by combining big name stars with local talent, and he seemed be to be plugged into a network of local sponsors and could draw large cards. One of his biggest triumphs was promoting a four-way match between Dusty Rhodes, Kevin Sullivan, Terry Funk and Abdullah the Butcher that drew nearly 5,000 fans. Ron and I had no idea at the time, but Bobby was funding FOW illegally.

While Bobby had his share of trouble — he pled guilty to charges in 1998 that he stole $3,500 in lottery tickets and $3,000 in cash from a business where he worked — that would pale in comparison to the federal charges he was about to face.

Early in his career, Rogers carried a WWF light heavyweight title belt that he bought from a collector and immediately pursued attention, claiming he was their champion. He later appeared with the belt on television shows like *Rolanda, Sally Jesse Raphael*, *Marilyn Kagan*, *Gabrielle* and *Richard Bey*. Bobby's appearances and false claims prompted several cease and desist orders from the WWF's legal department. He even worked one show for me where I had the ring announcer call him the WWWF light heavyweight champion. Bobby also appeared on *The People's Court* in a case against Bruce Owens. Rogers claimed that Bruce stole his belts. Judge Jerry Sheinland (Judge Judy's husband) spotted that they were conspiring with each other to manipulate the court in order to get the television exposure and threw the case out.

As part of his ongoing exploits, however, in 1999 Bobby placed his kidney for sale on the Internet auction site eBay and stirred so much online discord that not

only was his stunt mentioned on *The Simpsons*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and as a question on *Jeopardy*, it prompted eBay to adopt a policy that forbids the sale of human body parts.

His fascination with generating shock-based controversy continued as he publicly offered to chop a finger off on an ECW PPV if it would get him a full-time job with the company. Even Paul Heyman refused to associate his company with the stunt.

In 2002, Tampa's Salem "Sal" Hamaoui — who ran a successful video tape and DVD distribution business and worked with Missy Hyatt and her adult-themed Wrestling Vixxxens website and would later be the financial backer for the Florida-based Full Impact Pro Wrestling — complained that Rapuano had passed him a bad check for $9,500. When the sheriff's deputies arrived to arrest him, instead of taking Rapuano to jail they escorted him to a mental hospital, where he stayed for a week because he had made suicide threats.

Bobby was collared again in December 2003, when the Secret Service and U.S. marshals delivered arrest warrants. He was held, indicted and pleaded guilty. Because he wasn't cooperative at first, federal prosecutors recommended he spend 70 months in the cooler for defrauding several companies, including Sal's, out of thousands of dollars. In 2005 Rogers/Rapuano was sentenced to three and a half years in federal prison after being found guilty of using a counterfeit device that made credit cards and using intimidating force against a witness (his ex-girlfriend). The last I heard was that Rogers was paroled in late 2007 and was living at a halfway house in Fort Lauderdale and working a front desk job at a local hotel.

That said, Bobby's participation at a couple of my Armory shows did produce one of the most humorous in-ring promos ever cut by Buddy Colt. Bobby dressed quite differently than his namesake, usually in shorts or sweatpants, a loud Hawaiian shirt, a baseball cap that covered purple, blue or green hair and sneakers that were often untied. We did this angle in which Bobby showed up to question why NWA Florida never honored his "grandfather" the great Buddy Rogers (no actual relationship except for the fact Buddy helped train Bobby, gave him his first pair of boots and assisted him in getting a few paid shows while he was still alive), and before Bobby could say anything more, Colt went to the ring and berated him.

"I knew Buddy Rogers, and he would be turning over in his grave if he saw his grandson looking like this," Colt said. He made fun of Bobby's clothes, his shoes, hair color — you name it. Every time he asked Bobby a question, he prodded him for an answer with, "What do you have to say about that?" and put the microphone in front of Bobby. However, as soon as Bobby tried to answer, Buddy pulled the microphone away from him, not allowing him to say a word. Buddy Colt

helped get Bobby Rogers over as a heel by not letting him say a thing.

We had a lot of fun at the Armory and a number of really good things happened, but not everything we did was successful. We had way too many personality and ego issues from green wrestlers, and in some cases we just had some plain old-fashioned train wrecks.

My headaches weren't limited to those who wanted to make it to the big time, however; they also included some who had been there and were now well past their prime. When Hector Guerrero showed up at my inaugural event and I found out he wanted to work the shows, I was thrilled because some of the younger guys could really learn from him. After he put Rapada over in the world tournament, Hector had a guaranteed spot, and for the most part I let him do his thing. However, Hector had a bad habit of grabbing the ring microphone and cutting an in-ring promo, whether his match needed it or not. Sometimes he would say just a few words, sometimes he would go on and on . . .

At one show we were running tight on time, and before his match I told Hector we didn't have time for a promo. I asked him to get his win and get out of the ring. During the match I told Mark Nulty that as soon as the match was over to announce the winner and not give the microphone to Hector. Of course, Hector Guerrero asked Mark for the house microphone. Suspecting that would happen, I instructed my sound guy to cut off the wireless mic. When Hector realized it wouldn't work, he handed it back to Nulty. Mark again announced Hector as the winner, and Hector took the microphone back. Again I had my technician cut off the sound before he could say anything. Hector finally got the message and left. That was the last time he worked for me. Although I'm sure Hector meant no disrespect, I felt at the time he was not treating the rest of the workers on the card fairly since it would be taking time away from them.

Attendance-wise, by far the biggest financial disaster was the one show where probably some of the best wrestling took place — July's Super Junior Open. With virtually no big names on the card, the 12-man field had some of the best talent on the independent circuit at the time including Tom Carter (a.k.a. Reckless Youth) and "Fallen Angel" Christopher Daniels. A.J. Styles was originally supposed to be on the card, which would have marked the first time he'd face Daniels, but he was unable to work on the day of the show, so instead NWA Wildside's Jimmy Rave took his place. Rounding out the field were former NWA world junior champion "Tornado" Tony Kozina from the NWA's Pacific Northwest territory, Air Paris who wrestled for both the NWA's Georgia and Tennessee promotions, "Boston Bad Boy" Jason Rumble from NWA New England and Armory regulars and semi-regulars Mike Sullivan, Scoot Andrews, Jet Jaguar, Billy Fives, Lex Lovett and Pepe

Prado. Designed to put over Lovett, the tournament accomplished what it set out to do, except Carter took a nasty bump on the concrete floor that put him out of commission for a few months because Rave wasn't where he was supposed to be to catch him.

But perhaps the biggest scare was something that happened on the night both Steve Corino and the Heavenly Bodies would win their world championships. Aside from the two world title matches on the card, I had booked Chris Candido to work against Buck for the Florida title as part of his continued build. I had seen Chris earlier in the day when he arrived in town, and he was at the hotel I had the boys in and was just fine. At 6 p.m. Steve Corino and Mike Rapada showed up at the Armory, but Chris was not with them. They were ghost white.

"Where's Chris?"

Steve proceeded to tell me that they couldn't wake him up, and they had to get management to open the door.

"He looked dead," Mike said. "I really thought he was dead."

Steve shook his head in agreement.

"Howard, I got right into his face and yelled at the top of my lungs. . . . He didn't budge."

I was worried. "Are you sure he was alive?"

"He's alive," Steve said.

Even though I had heard rumors off and on about Chris, while I didn't want to believe it, this was proof positive that he was hooked on painkillers or whatever other kind of pill put him into a comatose state.

While we began planning for an alternative solution for Buck, Chris showed up at the building just as the first match was in the ring. He was groggy as hell, but he told Buck he would be ready when the time came, and he was. Surely it wasn't the best Chris Candido we'd ever see in the ring, but Buck was veteran enough to protect him, and they actually had a decent match. Chris was finally starting to come around and was fully awake at an after-show get-together where we celebrated the Corino and Body victories.

It should be pointed out that prior to Steve taking the title from Rapada, some people in the organization, most notably Bob Trobich, were so paranoid that Steve was going to throw down the title à la Shane Douglas, that Steve had to sign an agreement prior to his match that would make him personally liable for any actions that would be perceived as denigrating the NWA championship.

Steve loved the notion of being NWA world champion like his idol Dusty Rhodes, and with Steve and the Heavenly Bodies winning the titles, a new era was being ushered in for the NWA. Steve, who had a solid friendship with the editors at

PWI, finally got the magazine to recognize the NWA title as a world title once more, and Chris and Vito became the most traveled tag champs since Ricky Morton and Robert Gibson.

It seemed the more attention our champions were getting, the more attention the organization was getting, as even *World of Wrestling* magazine listed NWA VP Bill Behrens and me in their "Power 50" list of wrestling's most influential people. Even though we came in at number 43, slightly above the cleaning crew at Titan Towers, it was nice to get the recognition from Bill Apter.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the NWA looked at the credit I was being given for helping the organization as a positive thing. Throughout the year I started catching heat from some of the members about the number of titles being switched on my cards. The thing those members failed to take into account was that I was the only one willing to book the champions consistently.

Although I began booking the champion less frequently in response, as I started scaling back the talent on my shows and started pushing the NHB to main event status, I was able to help Steve in other areas while continuing to get the NWA exposure. The most prominent booking I was able to get him was on one of the Brian Pillman Memorial shows, where he defended the NWA title against Ric Flair's son David.

But perhaps the biggest favor I did for Steve was getting him booked in Japan for Shinya Hashimoto's company, Zero One. It was no secret that I wanted to work closely with a Japanese office, and with UFO no longer in business I set my sights on New Japan. But Simon Inoki suggested working with Zero One instead, a smaller company that had a good relationship with NJPW. When I first started talking to them in March 2001, they were gung ho to book the 6 foot 3, 240-pound Rapada, but they wanted nothing to do with Steve because they felt that at 6 foot 1 and not even 200 pounds he was too big to be a junior and too thin to be a heavyweight and would not be believable in any matches.

Despite explaining to them that Steve would be the world champion when their July tour would occur, through Simon I was fought tooth and nail by Yoshi Nakamura of the Zero One office about Steve. Part of getting Zero One on board was the promise of giving Hashimoto the title at some point, and if he was going to win it, it was most likely going to be from Steve. I finally told them that if Hashimoto ever had aspirations to be the NWA world champion, they would have to book the wrestlers the organization deemed suitable, and this time around it would be Steve Corino. As reluctant as they were, Zero One gave in and booked both Rapada and Steve for their July tour. Because they didn't know what to expect from the duo, they had them tag together and billed as the NWA intercontinental

tag team champions, only to lose the titles on July 12th to Yuuki Ishikawa and Shinjiro Otani.

While I have teased Steve through the years that he owes me 15 percent of what he made in Japan since I initially stuck my foot in the door for him, he kicked it wide open for himself and showed his willingness to do anything, which was what got him the full-time gig. Oddly enough, the spot Steve ended up getting was supposed to go to Rapada, but he screwed up royally while on tour. Nakamura and Hashimoto thought Rapada looked quite a bit like a member of the famous Von Erich family and as such wanted him to do the iron claw during his matches, which was a trademark of the Von Erichs. Rapada thought they were kidding around with him, so he did not follow their instructions and never used it once. When he and Steve returned from Japan, I was told Rapada was not cooperative. Although I tried as best as I could to get Rapada booked on a subsequent tour of Japan, they wanted nothing to do with him. When I told him what had happened, he was shocked that would prevent him from going back, and when he asked me to tell them he would do anything they asked I told him it was too late.

Although they liked the fact that Steve would be willing to do anything they asked, what really put Steve over the top with both the Japanese fans and the Zero One office was his performance at the NWA 53rd anniversary show in St. Petersburg against Hashimoto, a match that almost never came about.

Having won the bid to hold the annual event in my then hometown of Tampa, I had two major shows scheduled for the Armory before the October 13th event, which would be the only time all year we would do a show on a Saturday. The Tuesday, August 21st show titled a Hot August Fight 2 would see Steve defending the NWA world title against Florida champ Buck Q — despite outside interference from the Sandman of ECW fame who happened to be in town and asked me if he could sell photos and merchandise at a gimmick table — and Lex Lovett capturing the NWA world junior heavyweight title from NWA Southwest's Mike Thunder. The next show, scheduled for Tuesday, September 18th, and named Total Destruction for the NWA Wildside tag team (Sean Royal and Rusty Riddle) that would be challenging the New Heavenly Bodies, plus a Steve Corino title defense against the Sandman, was canceled, as the Tuesday before the show would see one of the most horrific occurrences in U.S. history — the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Because we held our shows at a government installation, the facility was put on lockdown, and all external events from that point forward were canceled.

As the month moved on, it did not look good for the NWA 53rd, and I notified the board of directors of my intention to cancel the weekend. There was no way I could find a suitable building to replace the Armory as every facility I could afford

was already booked. I did have the option to try to do the show out at the fairgrounds where I had promoted ECW several years earlier, but with less than four weeks to go, the expense of the building would have been financial suicide.

In the middle of all this, for the second time, my marriage was in grave danger. Although I had not yet shared my decision with anyone in the organization, I had made up my mind not to seek another term as NWA president, as it became obvious I was dedicating too much time to wrestling and not enough time to my relationship.

Just as I decided to pull the plug on the anniversary show, Ron Niemi stepped forward and offered me his building in St. Petersburg called the WrestlePlex. While I appreciated the offer, the facility only held about 200 at best, and with standing room only maybe we could squeeze another 20 people in. Although it became my only option, Ron certainly wasn't doing this simply out of the goodness of his heart. Being familiar with the area he knew what my choices were and took advantage of the situation, charging me a premium for something that wasn't costing him an extra penny. Still, what alternatives did I really have left? If I was going to do the show, it would have to be there.

When I told the NWA board of the offer I got from Ron, it was Jim Miller who suggested the NWA waive the fee I was supposed to pay for the right to host the anniversary weekend in an effort to offset some of the costs and to encourage me not to cancel — I think it was $500. Although I was reluctant to move ahead because I didn't know how travelers who would be coming in from out of town would react, I finally decided to make it work as Miller, Behrens, Rich Arpin, Ed Chuman and Fred Rubenstein all offered words of encouragement and support.

While I had no doubt that I could sell the building out as I had already pre-sold about 50 tickets from when I had announced the show being held at the Armory, I was still a little hesitant. But with only 150 more tickets to sell, I knew it would not require much advertising beyond posters, flyers and the Internet to sell out.

The only casualty of the weekend when I chose to move forward was that I decided to scrub the idea of a fan fest. With such a small number of people slated to be in attendance, I felt vendors would not be willing to shell out money to participate.

Although we had a building to host the event, it was tiny compared to the Fort Homer W. Hesterly Armory. In hindsight it is a shame we never got to do a proper sendoff show at the historical building. I ran that building regularly for a year, and it took an attack against the U.S. to shut us down. As it would turn out, the August show I promoted would be the last pro wrestling event ever held in the building,

as they never reopened it to the public. While I had attempted to do one final pro wrestling event in that building as late as 2007 and give it a proper send-off because of its pro wrestling significance, the Armory has since been sold to a private firm that will be turning it into something other than an arena.

With everything once again set for the NWA 53rd, there was trouble brewing halfway around the world. At the height of paranoia and hysteria over the September 11th attacks and the subsequent anthrax scare that was fueled by sensationalized media coverage in Japan, I received word from Tokyo that Hashimoto was pulling out of his match with Steve Corino, fearing to get on an airplane.

It took months to set up and coordinate, and at such a late juncture I was not able to find a decent replacement for him. I didn't want to bring in Rapada since he and Steve had already worked each other three times in the area. Sandman was unavailable. Dan Severn was unavailable. Dusty and Dustin were already booked for a Turnbuckle show Dusty was doing in Georgia. Abdullah the Butcher wanted way too much money to put over Steve ($1,500) and Sabu flat out refused to do the clean job for him at the time — something Steve experienced in the Pacific Northwest when both were working for Dave Republic. I had even thought about booking Buff Bagwell since he and Steve had had a little to-do in Philadelphia two months earlier; Steve, as NWA champion, refused to put Bagwell over on a show booked by Tod Gordon at the ECW Arena for a new group called Main Event Championship Wrestling, owned by a guy named John Collins, who was supposedly an attorney from Indiana.

Despite my pleas to Yoshi Nakamura and Simon Inoki to get Hashimoto to change his mind, it seemed my request was falling on deaf ears. It looked like the only way I was going to get Hashimoto to get on an airplane was going to be of his own volition.

So I did what I knew how to do best: I used the Japanese press to convince Hashimoto to come to the U.S.

I contacted my old friend Max Seki in Tokyo and had him issue a statement to the Japanese press on my behalf. The statement from me as NWA president basically said that Hashimoto was afraid to come to the U.S. not because of the threat of terrorism as he had led everyone to believe, but because he was afraid that he could not defeat the smaller yet more resilient NWA World Champion Steve Corino. We basically used the press to call Hashimoto a coward, and within two days he was back on the card; reluctantly so, but he would be there nonetheless.

The atmosphere of the show was off the hook, but unfortunately we had all sorts of technical issues. The electricity was not working before the show, but it eventually came back on. The ring broke during one of the preliminary matches,

and to stall for time while the ring was being fixed, our heel referee for the night, Fred Richards (a.k.a. NWA board member Fred Rubenstein), told of his emotionally charged experience through tearful eyes of helping fire and rescue crews at ground zero in New York, which got a standing ovation. And thanks to my error counting tickets, we sold almost 250 tickets, 30 more than we could fit in the building, and had to open the loading dock doors in the back of the arena to make more room for people to stand. If people got up to go to the bathroom, they most likely lost their seat — but amazingly there were no complaints. According to Chuman and Gino Moore who were working the door, a number of people who wanted tickets were turned away. If the fire marshal had shown up, we would have been screwed.

The show itself had three eventful matches for the local crowd — a war games style cage match between NWA Florida and IPW Hardcore, the first ever in-ring meeting between A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels and the Corino-Hashimoto match.

The cage match had its share of fans, as it brought an end to the nearly year-long feud between the two organizations. I publicly promised the cage match would conclude the feud between Ron Niemi and I, and it did when a horde of NWA Wildside wrestlers led by Behrens hit the ring and attacked both NWA Florida and IPW wrestlers. At the end of the night Niemi and I stood side-by-side defending the honor of the Sunshine State from the invading Georgians. Yours truly even broke his own credo by working blue and announcing on the microphone to Behrens, who was backstage at this point, that he "fucked with the wrong guy." The Wildside attack was intended to spark a new inter-promotion feud between NWA Wildside and an NWA Florida/IPW coalition, but it never took off, probably because the NWA 53rd was the last NWA show I would ever promote.

From a technical standpoint the Styles-Daniels match, conceived of and booked by Vito DeNucci, outshined nearly everything else on the card, and the finish caught everyone by surprise as Styles won. The match really put A.J. Styles on the independent map because even though people had heard of him they didn't know how good he really was. Brian Nobbs, who along with Dave Penzer had come down to watch the matches to scout for potential talent for the new XWF group they were working with, was blown away by the duo and was amazed to learn it was their first time in the ring together.

But it was the brutality and execution behind the Corino-Hashimoto match and the subsequent angle that really stole the show. Everybody who was involved in the outcome played their roles so flawlessly that even people working on the card and some of the veterans in attendance, like Jimmy Del Ray, thought it was a shoot and not a work.

What the fans saw was Steve take several brutal and quite stiff kicks to the head from Hashimoto, one of which opened up a cut over Steve's eye that made his face, as the late Gordon Solie would say, a crimson mask. Fred stopped the match because of the laceration, claiming Steve could no longer continue and awarded the match and the belt to Hashimoto. After regaining his composure, Steve was so enraged at the decision that he stormed out of the ring and out of the small building, kicking over tables and garbage cans, and as he went out of the building, the entire crowd followed him.

With all the fans looking on, as promoter and now former president I started arguing with Fred, publicly claiming that according to NWA rules, the title couldn't change hands on a technical knockout, only a pin fall or submission. This prompted all the other NWA board members to get involved in the argument over which one of us was right. With all seven members of the board of directors in attendance, we were going to settle the dispute on the spot, but when two of the board members sided with Fred and two sided with me, it split us down the middle. The only person not to weigh in was newly elected president Jim Miller. What was interesting was that out in the parking lot, where all this was taking place, some of the fans were watching and listening to us argue on one side of the parking with the wrestlers from the dressing room keeping order between Hashimoto and Steve on the other.

By the time some of the heat died down, Hashimoto got into a car and waited for a final ruling. The Japanese press and video crew that had accompanied the Zero One contingency continued shooting photos and footage. When Miller finally handed down his decision — the title would be held up and decided at a rematch — the group from Zero One with Hashimoto in tow left the scene.

Until Behrens broke kayfabe and filled in people like Dave Meltzer and Bob Ryder that the whole ordeal was a work, which Steve and I were quite upset at, the initial reports that got out was that the match conclusion and aftermath was completely legit. While it was similar to what we did with Dory and Dan, this came across much better because it involved the head of one of the up and coming wrestling companies in Japan and could actually be turned into a financial windfall. This time around there would be a payoff.

The psychology behind the entire execution was simply brilliant, and although I wish I could take all the credit for it, I can't.

That honor goes to Mr. Corino.

Twenty-four hours earlier, immediately following the anniversary banquet I hosted at a Japanese restaurant called Crazy Buffet, Steve and I sat down with Hashimoto and Nakamura to go over the match details. Rich Arpin of NWA

Ohio/West Virginia was also there as he was touted to be the new liaison with the Japanese office. Even though I later learned they were not happy with my leaving that role, it needed to take place.

Steve, who had studied some of the best-executed Japanese angles over the years by combing through hundreds of hours of video tape to prepare for his match with Hashimoto, laid out his game plan and how he could make it believable for him to go toe-to-toe with someone who was as big, powerful and skilled as Hashimoto. Steve basically recited the scenario from the movie *Rocky*, in which his goal wasn't to win but to go the distance. The only difference was since Steve was champion, he had to convey through his actions that special quality that would make the Japanese fans understand how he, as a much smaller opponent, could overcome such odds and become champion. Remember, the last person who had held the title in Japan, Ogawa, was a national hero.

So Steve told Hashimoto about his plan to take the stiff kicks to the head and that he was going to gig himself over his eye at the right time, thus enabling the ref to step in and stop the fight. Hashimoto did not like the idea at first because a misplaced blow could actually be fatal, and I thought Steve was crazy, taking way too much risk. Steve told us he would block what he could but felt that in order for him to get over with the Japanese fans, it had to be perceived as real as possible. While Hashimoto agreed with him, he told Steve it was dangerous and, through Nakamura doing the interpretation, they agreed to limit the head blows and instead would concentrate on the upper torso, where Steve could sell them like head shots.

The calculated risk worked, and when the video started being seen around Japan, Steve got so over with the fans because of his grit and determination that he soon found new success as a Zero One regular, eventually being responsible for booking other American workers in Japan.

I wish I could say that Steve was the only one who left the NWA 53rd with a gash over one of his eyes, but I can't. During the middle part of the show, as I sat in Ron Niemi's little office taking care of paying David Sierra, I heard the unmistakable whistle of Bill Alfonso.

"What the hell is that?" I looked up startled while counting out Cuban's pay.

"It's Fonzie," he said, stating the obvious.

"Yeah, but what the hell's he doing?"

Not long after we started running shows at the Armory, Fonzie started working regularly for me as he would always manage Buck Q or other members of the Tampa Clique. Neither Vito nor I had booked him for the show and because money was tight, I didn't have any money to pay him; I literally ran out of cash making the last of the envelopes. Although I had seen him earlier in the night out-

side the building selling photos, I didn't mind if he did so because he had become a regular, but I wasn't about to pay him if we didn't book him.

At the end of the night, after paying the last of the workers that I was responsible for — usually on the NWA anniversary cards the individual promoters were responsible for taking care of their own talent — Fonzie came up to me wanting to be paid for the night. He seemed to be a little strung out. I don't know if it was coke or crack or what, but he was high.

"You forgot me," he said, coming up from behind me on my left side just as I was about to leave the building to head home.

"Sorry Bill, I don't have anything for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I have no money," I said, looking him square in the eyes. "I don't have anything for you."

"But I worked for you," he said, not comprehending why he wasn't being paid.

"But I didn't book you."

"But I worked for you!" he said again a little louder.

"But I didn't book you!" I repeated. There was a long pause. "Did Vito book you?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No. But I always work for you!" he said, starting to get upset.

"But I don't have any money for you, Bill. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to pay me."

"I don't have anything left," I reiterated. "I have no money."

With that Bill started getting angry and raising his voice incoherently.

"I don't need this shit," I said, physically drained after the long day, and with that I stuck my hand in my pocket to get my car keys and turned away from him to head out the door.

Just as I took my first step — whap! whap! whap, whap, whap! — before I knew what had happened, Fonzie had blindsided me and had unleashed a succession of punches that caught me in the face, one of which broke my glasses, causing the frames to rip the skin over my right eye. I was in such shock from the barrage that I didn't even put up my hands to defend myself, instead my reaction was "What the fuck are you doing? Are you fucking crazy?"

Ron Niemi and Bill Behrens, who were both close by, grabbed Fonzie almost immediately after he started punching, but the damage was done. My eye swelled up, and blood was gushing. I don't know why I didn't fight back, but I didn't. I was just stunned.

If there was any indication why I should have cared more about my marriage and less about wrestling, this was it, and that's what went through my mind as Bill

helped me dress the eye with bandages in the bathroom.

About 20 minutes later, I finally left the WrestlePlex, and as I began walking toward my car at the other end of the parking lot, a car rolled up alongside me. It was Fonzie and this guy from Boston that he sometimes hung around with, who I always suspected of being his dealer. I knew the guy he rolled with was packing, and I honestly thought I was going to be killed.

"That's right, motherfuckerer," Fonzie yelled through the open window, "The smallest guy in the dressing room kicked your ass." With that the car stopped, and Fonzie jumped out and came around the front, heading right toward me.

"Bill, get your ass back in the car," I heard a voice from behind me say. Fonzie came to a dead stop. It was Vito. Right behind him was Chris, Ron and Devon Nash (Ron's partner in the WrestlePlex and IPW). I think Behrens had already left.

As the driver of the car started to make a move to get out too, either Chris or Vito said, "Don't even think about it."

"Now get the fuck back in the car and go home," Vito repeated.

Fonzie started yapping again about his pay. Not wanting to hear his crap, Vito went into his pocket and took the hundred dollars I had given him earlier and threw it to the floor at Fonzie's feet. Fonzie grabbed the money.

"You're pathetic," Vito told him.

I didn't say anything and just stood there. Fonzie got in the car, the driver made a u-turn in the parking lot and they drove away. Chris and Vito walked with me to my car, while Ron and Devon walked back to the building entry. As I got in the car to head home, Chris and Vito told me not to let it bother me and that we'd deal with Fonzie in due time. I thanked them, and as they walked back to the building I could see they were upset at what had happened. Chris and Vito had become good friends over the year, and they knew this just wasn't the way to do business.

A couple of days after the incident I got a call from Fonzie, who apologized for what had happened. He said that when he saw me reach for my pocket, he thought I was going for a gun or a knife and he was just trying to protect himself, which was absolutely preposterous. I know years later he told our mutual friend Tod Gordon that he gave me what I had coming, and when Tod asked him if he was high at the time, Fonzie denied it. I knew better. But it didn't matter. In my mind nothing mattered anymore as I had gone into a deep depression.

Even when I heard through the grapevine that Jimmy Hart had canceled Fonzie off the XWF TV taping in Orlando as a courtesy to me and as a show of support, while I greatly appreciated the gesture, it was not necessary. In hindsight, while Bill Alphonso should never have done what he did, I probably should have defused the

situation by saying something to the effect of, "I don't have anymore money on me right now, Bill, we'll have to work something out." Instead it got ugly.

Shortly thereafter I got a call from my friend Mike Calta, who in Tampa was and is best known by his radio persona, Cowhead. At the time he had a radio show called *The Steel Cage* and he gave us a ton of publicity throughout the year. He wanted me to come on the show with Fonzie to discuss what had happened. I passed. I confided in Mike that I was going through something more important than wrestling, and the best thing I could do was stay away from anything wrestling-related for a while.

When I got home on the night of the anniversary show, my wife, Sharon, took one look at my eye and wanted me to call the police to file an assault charge against Bill. I told her I would in the morning just to keep her at ease, but I never had the intention to do so. The next morning, still tired and upset from the events of the night before, as if the slash over my eye weren't evidence that I had taken enough of a beating, Sharon dropped the real bomb — she wanted another divorce. I thought I would lose my mind. I knew things weren't all butterflies and rainbows, but we had been going to a marriage counselor in order to save our relationship, and things seemed to be getting better. This turn of events caught me completely by surprise.

Sharon told me she had actually made up her mind over the last few weeks but didn't want to tell me until after the show because she didn't want me to be distracted. I just snapped. Wave after wave of different feelings hit me, from anger and frustration to despair and helplessness and everything in between. I went from wanting to throw her out of the house and telling her good riddance to begging her to stay in order to give our marriage another shot.

It was too little and apparently too late. Sharon had made up her mind, and I felt like I was going to lose mine. Deciding not to run for the presidency of the organization just wasn't enough. I was going to have to do more — or so I thought.

My failures have been errors of judgment, not of intent.
— Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885)

FIFTEEN

LIFE AFTER THE NWA

BILL OTTEN

With longtime friends and in-ring opponents Terry Funk and Dusty Rhodes

We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.

— Joseph Campbell (1904–1987)

If I'm going to be honest about why I left the National Wrestling Alliance, I really don't think it had anything to do with my failed marriage. It had more to do with my pride and thinking the organization would fall apart without me at the helm. (Yeah, my ego was that inflated.) My first step out the door was my decision to give up being president.

Before the annual meeting, while I told my wife I would be stepping down, I still had my doubts. I wanted to make certain that if I did step aside, the one person who was most qualified for the position would get the position — and for me there was no argument that guy was Bill Behrens.

Bill had been vice president for the better part of three years, and unlike the other potential successors, he had both the industry contacts and the ability to make the tough decisions that would help him succeed. Sometimes I had to make difficult choices and decisions that weren't always popular, but at the end of the day the membership would know I did things in the best interest of everybody rather than a select few. I always thought Bill, like me, could see the big picture.

Before sharing my decision with the membership not to re-run for president but to run for the board of directors — as I thought I could help Bill as he helped me over the previous three years — I wanted the make sure he would have enough votes to be selected. Based on who was running for the board and what proxies were being held, I figured the new board would shape up to be: me, Bill, Fred Rubenstein, Jim Miller, Rick O'Brien, Rich Arpin and Ernie Todd. I knew Miller, who was a co-VP and causing waves within the membership by questioning some of my decisions, would be a headache for me if he got the presidency as he perceived the role to be that of a dictator rather than what it really was, which was an administrator.

I knew O'Brien and Arpin would side with Miller, while Ernie and I would cast our votes for Bill. Ernie was loyal, and when I asked him to support Bill he agreed, saying he planned on voting for Bill anyway. That left Fred. And of course, in my mind, it was a slam dunk. Fred was my friend and always loyal to me. When he promised me something, his word was gold. So when he said he would vote for Bill that pledge was all the assurance I needed to step aside and let Bill take control.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the ballot box. Fred didn't vote for Bill. The swerve truly pissed me off. The last thing I wanted to be was sanctimonious about it all, but the thing that frustrated me was Fred's deceit. Although he'd never admit it, I think Fred switched his vote because he thought he could manipulate Miller, whereas he knew he couldn't control Bill. When I confronted him about it afterward, he admitted to switching his allegiance and claimed the reason was that Bill had a habit of talking down to people. To be fair, several times during my tenure as NWA president Fred would bring this up to me and said he thought Bill belittled people, including me, too frequently.

While I could see Fred's argument, Rubenstein was certainly not an outsider, and what he and others considered belittling was simply Bill talking from a position of knowledge. Unlike me, Bill did not have the patience to walk members

COURTESY BILL BEHRENS

The man who should have been king: perennial NWA vice president Bill Behrens

through the same issues time and time again, and frequently he would get frustrated and a bit annoyed, and it often could be heard in his tone. Truth be told, Bill was right. We were grown men. The coddling from above needed to stop.

In time I would forgive Fred, but in the heat of the moment I felt both foolish and betrayed. Still, I agreed to transition some of my old duties to other members of the board where I could and even agreed to help Miller with communications, as that was not his strongest skill.

For a week or so, that was fine. But not long after Sharon asked for a divorce, there were rumblings within the board about my expenses from the previous year, specifically my telephone charges.

At the AGM, as part of the regular order of business, issues are brought up from the prior year's business for open discussion. In Tampa, everything was open for discussion, including my rather hefty phone expenses — between $3,000 and $5,000. But the amount was not questioned, and when the membership voted to accept and close all the previous year's business that should have been the end of it. . . . It wasn't.

I don't remember if it was Arpin or O'Brien, but somebody brought up the phone bill and instead of quashing old business, Miller, who at times seemed as though he wanted to be Mr. Congeniality instead of the president, said he would look in to it.

To be fair, it was not the first time my phone expenses were discussed. Almost from the start it was a bone of contention for some. When the organization had no money it was Ring Warriors that picked up the bill, but once there was cash flow, the NWA had to pay its own way. All things considered, with the number of members the organization grew to, plus the fact we had one member in the United Kingdom and another in Japan, spending an average of $500 a month to run the organization by phone wasn't outrageous, but some disagreed.

At one point the membership had actually agreed for me to get a cell phone that would be used exclusively for NWA business, but of course I never bothered. Instead

I followed a process that seemed to work for both Bob Trobich and me. Because I used the same line for both personal and other business calls, I kept a diary of all NWA-related business. Then, when I got my bill each month, I would go through the bill line-by-line and match it to my call diary, highlighting the NWA calls. I'd then add up all the calls, add the appropriate taxes and submit that amount to Bob for reimbursement. Once I got reimbursed from Bob, instead of keeping all that paper, I'd toss the diary, trash the full bill and just keep the first page of the phone bill, which showed the full amount due, the amount I paid from my personal checking account and how much I got reimbursed. That was my routine. I used the same exact process for Ring Warriors, and it worked fine for three years. I never gave it any thought and neither did Bob.

But, as the new president, Jim felt it was unacceptable. As he put it, in the event we were ever to be audited, he wanted copies of the full bills from the previous year, with the NWA business calls highlighted, to show the expenses were legitimate. After I explained to him that I no longer had the bills, he asked me to call my phone company and get copies of the bills and then when I could, to go through the bills and highlight the calls.

While I understood his intention might be good, and in looking back I don't think he was actually accusing me of anything, that's not how I took it at the time. Going through a divorce with my head already clouded, I took Jim's request as questioning my intent. I also felt there would be no way for me in November to look at a bill 10 months old and identify which calls were which without my diaries.

I refused to cooperate with his request, accusing him of being on a witch hunt and trying to discredit me, implying I stole money from the organization. He maintained that was never his intent. Jim contended all along he was simply trying to tighten up some seriously shabby record keeping. But I still felt that if my paperwork was good enough for the IRS it was good enough for the NWA.

I honestly felt some members were just looking for an excuse to blame me for something, as there was this ongoing misconception of how powerful my position really was. But the NWA president never wielded much power. The strength of the position came from the board. If you controlled the hearts and minds of the board members, as I usually did, because I engaged those who I felt I could trust, then you had reign to do whatever it was you were empowered to do. Jim and others like Arpin, however, thought the power was an entitlement, when in fact it was based on trust. I never demanded respect from the members of the organization, it was something I was fortunate to have always been given . . . until then.

And so to add fuel to the developing fire, the same members who brought up

the issue in the first place saw my defiance as an admission of a guilty conscience. Some of them began making accusations in earnest. Fred, Bill and Ernie, to their credit, tried to derail the notion, but others kept on it, and with everything else going on in my life, I decided I simply didn't need the fight.

In my mind I gave everything I had and then some to help rebuild the NWA from zero. I frequently sacrificed personal gain for the sake of the brand and the members; now, many of the people who I had helped bring into the fold were treating me as if I were a criminal. The only thing I was truly guilty of was putting the business first, but that had been my choice.

At that point I felt the only thing I had left was my integrity, and I wasn't going to let them take that from me. Before anyone could even consider making a motion against me, I did one of the very few things I have regretted doing in my life, business-wise; I resigned from the NWA. Seven years of my life washed away in one poignant email to the board of directors. If I was going to leave it was going to be on my terms. In hindsight, perhaps if other things in my life had been going better for me, I would have stuck around and fought.

Almost immediately after sending my email to the board and the organization's legal counselor, I received phone calls from Fred Rubenstein, Bill Behrens, Ernie Todd, Rich Arpin and Bob Trobich, all with the same message: reconsider. Although I was unable to do so, they recognized my judgment was being clouded. I suppose if my friend Jerry Blow would have been there, he would have brought up that analogy of taking a hand grenade in each hand and pulling the pins out with my teeth. I was committing political suicide, but I didn't care. I felt I deserved to be treated better than I was, and the resignation was my way of saying "Fuck you!"

While Fred and others tried their best to dissuade me, Bill Behrens tried the hardest. He literally begged me not to send out a public statement and tried to convince me to take the night to sleep on the decision, warning me that once I made it public, the organization would have no recourse other than to accept it.

I thanked Bill, but I was a stubborn bastard, and without thinking of any additional consequences, I made the resignation public, citing personal reasons. And the more I began thinking of the position I had been put in, the more I began resenting some of the members, especially people like Miller, O'Brien and Chuman.

Even when I made money for the members, all some of them seemed to do was complain it wasn't enough. I made a deal with Figures Inc. out of Rhode Island, for example, to license the rights to make "replica" NWA belts. The NWA's investment was zero. They were limited to making 1,000 items, and so I cut a deal for $5,000 to the NWA — whatever Figures sold they would keep. They ended up selling the replicas for about a hundred dollars each and grossing somewhere

between $90,000 and $95,000. Guys like Chuman and Miller, who had talked about merchandise since day one but never produced anything except a bunch of referee patches, saw the gross number and got greedy after the fact, saying I should've brought them into the negotiation at the beginning because they could have gotten us more money. Whether they could or couldn't really didn't matter. I made the deal to create cash flow. And the reality was five percent of gross — based on $100,000 — was not horrible, considering what our investment was. It was the first NWA-licensed brand item ever, and they were complaining . . .

Another deal I cut was in licensing a commercial video to Japan, from when Naoya Ogawa toured the U.S. and worked for our members. Through my friend Max Seki in Tokyo, we were able to get a video distributor to pay several thousand dollars for the footage of Ogawa against a variety of opponents, most of which was shot on grainy, VHS tape stock with natural lighting. The quality of the tape was bad, and it was positioned as "fan-cam" footage. But of the money the NWA received, only half stayed with the organization and the other half was distributed to the members who provided the footage, giving them a windfall on their small investment. I made sure Jim Miller got an even cut because even though Ogawa had missed his booking, he was scheduled to actually wrestle for him. Even with that those who didn't book Ogawa initially started complaining they didn't get a cut of the money, and those who did get a cut complained the NWA shouldn't have taken half the money since the NWA never risked anything.

I never made a dime off either of those deals, even though I probably could have argued a 15 or 20 percent commission on the Ogawa video considering I used a personal contact. While my licensing skills may have been far from perfect, the deals I made were better than the "nothing" that had been negotiated previously.

Only a few weeks after resigning, if I hadn't already pissed off every NWA member, I was surely about to. With my divorce final, I wanted to start a new NWA-type organization that I could stick in their faces — except this wouldn't be a membership organization, it would be a dictatorship. Getting together with my new best buddy "The American Dream" Dusty Rhodes, who owned Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling, in early February 2002, I attempted to relaunch the Ring Warriors brand by pulling together a meeting in Atlanta that included a few friends and some select NWA members. At the meeting were Dusty, his then TCW booker Ray Lloyd (a.k.a. Glacier), Sheldon Goldberg from New England Championship Wrestling and cherry-picked NWA members Fred Rubenstein and Joe Panzarino from New Jersey, Ernie Todd from Winnipeg and David "Slim" Baucom from North Carolina and his booker Rick Lindsey (a.k.a. Rick Nelson). I also invited Bill Behrens, but he declined.

Concept-wise, everyone was on board. But the new incarnation of Ring Warriors died as soon as it began. The NWA members who did show up caught major heat from those who weren't invited, and a severe lack of funds prevented us from properly executing the plan we had in mind, which included a select group of traveling wrestlers for the top of the card, with the local promoter filling out the bottom of the cards. We'd channel everything through a central booking office that would start with Dusty and feed to Ray and Rick. While we came out of the gate pretty fast, we lost steam and the group lost interest.

By May 2002, with nothing keeping me in Florida, the company I was working for moved me to their headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina, and for the next four years I would make my home in the Southern Piedmont.

Around the time I was making my arrangement to move to the Carolinas, the NWA announced they had struck a deal with Jerry and Jeff Jarrett, and their new wrestling venture, TNA — Total Nonstop Action Wrestling.

Interestingly enough I was actually approached by Bob Ryder on behalf of Jeff before I left the NWA. At the time Bob asked me about the NWA brand and what it would take for a new company to control the brand and the titles. I told him straight up that anyone designated by the NWA to carry the strap had to put up a $10,000 surety bond. When he said he thought that was steep I told him I wouldn't even consider the discussion unless that criteria were met, citing that when the belt went to Japan a couple of years before, Inoki put up the money. That was pretty much the end of the conversation, but what I didn't know was that while he was talking to me, Jerry Jarrett was talking to Bill Behrens about the exact same thing.

You have to bear in mind I took the inquiry from Ryder with a grain of salt because it's not like it was the first time someone had approached me about "taking over" and controlling the NWA. A couple of years earlier a small wrestling company in New England called Chaotic Wrestling approached me about "buying" the NWA, and despite listening to a proposal from their lawyers in which a lot of big promises were made, nothing ever materialized. I thought Bob's approach was more of the same. While Bob and I always had a good relationship, it's not as though he was always a cogent guy. When the WWF bought WCW, Bob called me and tried to convince me to go to the U.S. Department of Justice and attempt to block the sale, citing the WWF was trying to create an industry monopoly. When I asked him, "Why I would do that?" his response was, "You'll be saving wrestling." I thought the action was irrational, and besides in a bizarre twist of wrestling fate, the WWF had saved the NWA. In my mind, the NWA, or at least my NWA, owed Vince a debt of gratitude.

The NWA was now working with TNA, and I was moving to Charlotte. Initially

I thought I could help Slim put some shows on in Charlotte like I had done in Tampa, but I soon recognized that his involvement in the wrestling business had become passive. With his wife, Jackie (wrestler Strawberry Fields), no longer taking an active interest in the business, Slim had pretty much turned over the promoting reigns to Rick Nelson, and in fact the shows under the NWA Mid-Atlantic banner were his. Slim and Rick had an established business relationship in which Nelson took the financial risk on the shows, and by presenting the events under the NWA banner, Slim kept his membership. Sometimes if Rick was short on cash, Slim would float him, but it was a minor investment.

Within a few months of moving to Charlotte I attended a couple of Rick's shows, and although the crowds weren't the greatest, the events themselves were extremely well-organized and professional. It was obvious Rick knew his stuff. But before long I grew tired of attending the shows; I wanted to have more direct involvement, and it was obvious that wasn't going to happen by working with Rick. So I spoke to Slim about fronting me some money to do monthly shows in Charlotte, and even though I had paid him back the money that he had lent me in Florida by providing web design services for a couple of his companies, he was reluctant. I wanted to run shows at the Grady Cole Center, which was where the NWA 51st had been held, but the rental was three times as much as what I had been paying in Tampa for the Armory. It was apparent that unless I came up with the money myself, I would not be promoting shows in the Queen City.

As the year progressed, I started losing the itch, while the NWA became more and more intertwined with TNA. I still had a passing interest, however, and slowly but surely I started picking up bits and pieces of the details of their agreement. I learned the contract between the two had no specific timetable and the NWA wasn't even paid a licensing fee. As a matter of fact, TNA never even had to put up a surety bond for using the NWA belts.

Years later I found out from Jerry Jarrett that when the NWA contingency of Miller and Behrens went to Nashville to negotiate the deal, Jarrett was all ready for the dog-and-pony show and thought it would cost him anywhere from $100,000 to $250,000 a year for the exclusive licensing rights to the NWA belts. Although he tried to get Bill to give him the lowdown and inside track on dealing with Miller, Bill stayed loyal to the NWA and did not smarten Jarrett up as he personally would benefit from a deal that favored the NWA. Jarrett had no idea what position Miller would take, so the first offer he made included exposure of the NWA brand and nothing else. He did it to gauge their reaction. Thinking they would come back with a claim that the offer was insulting, imagine how surprised Jerry was when the offer was accepted. For Miller and Behrens the prize wasn't the money, but exposure of the

NWA brand on TNA television which they believed would have a trickle down effect.

By the end of the summer rumors were rampant concerning the direction of the NWA, and Fred got under my skin with the notion that Bill Behrens had somehow backstabbed me by taking over the Florida territory, which had previously been mine. Although I had now lost my yearning to actually run shows, I still craved the day-to-day activities that went along with the business and with Miller, Arpin, O'Brien and others still complaining about the phone bill, I enjoyed stirring the shit with them whenever I could. It turned out Slim was not going to be able to attend the annual meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas, and he decided to send me down with his proxy. Even though I was not a member, there was nothing in the bylaws that prevented me from attending the meeting and casting a vote on behalf of Slim. That made some members unhappy.

Before heading to Texas, I was led to believe by Fred that Bill Behrens was in a conflict of interest between the NWA and TNA and was feeding proprietary information to TNA that could potentially be used against NWA members. Since he had already gotten it into my head that Behrens was a bad seed for taking "my" territory, he asked for my help in unseating Behrens from the board; I agreed, but only if Miller would be removed too, since I felt he was still harboring ill feelings toward me about the phone bill and my perceived power. Although Fred didn't want to remove Miller from the board, claiming he could control him as needed, I argued against it saying that if he could have controlled him he would have. Ultimately the prize was removing Behrens, and I worked with Fred to line up some of the members who were still somewhat loyal to me to get Rick O'Brien enough votes to instill him as president. O'Brien had agreed to drop the pursuit of the phone issue if I would help. I agreed, not because he agreed to drop the issue but because I was convinced Behrens had somehow done me wrong.

By the time I got to Corpus Christi for the AGM, word started circulating that there was movement afoot to remove Miller and Behrens. By 9:00 p.m., while I was eating dinner, Rich Arpin, who had also dropped the phone bill issue, sought me out as he and Fred got word that O'Brien changed his mind and was not going along with the plan to unseat Miller and Behrens. O'Brien chose to stay loyal to Miller and was about to throw a monkey wrench into Fred's plan.

At what would come to be known as the Midnight Meeting in Corpus Christi, I helped pull a group of NWA promoters together that included Fred, Rich, Ken Taylor, Ernie Todd, Dave Republic, Alvin Minnick and Mike Porter, and I explained to them that if they only voted for each other for the board and nobody else, between their votes and the combined proxies they all held, they could unseat the entire board, including Miller, Behrens, O'Brien and Chuman, and instill

themselves into power to make whatever changes they deemed necessary going forward. I pledged Slim's vote for the group and got Johnny Moss from the United Kingdom who was carrying Andre Baker's proxy to commit as an insurance policy.

When the vote came down the next day at the meeting, the entire sitting board knew the fix was in, and O'Brien was so upset by the turn of events that he stormed out of the meeting. Miller couldn't understand why he had been unseated as in his mind he helped deliver TNA to the organization, and Behrens was pissed because as he saw it, the entire vote had to do with personalities and nothing more.

I would later learn that the paranoia about Bill Behrens was somewhat unfounded, and in many ways he was kept in the dark about TNA affairs by Jerry Jarrett. The conflict of interest charges were initially unwarranted, driven more by jealousy than anything else. Bill always had a knack for working with the major companies, and even when I was heading up the NWA, Bill had paid gigs at various times from both WCW and the WWF. While others saw his position as a potential compromise, I always thought it gave us leverage in working with the bigger companies. Still, professional jealousy in pro wrestling is not uncommon.

As time marched on, the more I realized that Fred used me to advance his own political agenda. I decided that if I was going to have any further influence within the organization it would be under my terms, so anytime a favor was asked of me by Fred, to place a call or try to convince a member to do something on his behalf, while I told him I would reach out to help him, I didn't. Instead, I simply ignored the request and let things take a natural course; if he wanted something done he was going to have to get it done himself.

As the *new* NWA board with Arpin as its new president, tried to move forward its agenda with TNA, I started to become aware of the terms of their new agreement. While some members touted how wonderful the deal was, it was horrible for the NWA. Not only did TNA still not have to put up money for the NWA belts, but the licensing fee they were paying the organization for exclusive use of the titles was about $12,000 a year; a joke considering they were spending millions of dollars a month. The so-called wonderful 10-year deal the NWA had was worth just over $100,000.

Because I had participated at the NWA meeting in October, by the middle of the first quarter of 2003 I had started to get the itch again, and this time instead of just wanting to do live shows I started thinking about doing another television show. Howard Lipkint and I talked about trying to get a major cable network on board, and he even went so far as to speak to WGN about doing a show. They were willing to do business, but they wanted to be paid for their time. Although Howard tried to convince me to go to Slim with the deal, I chose not to — I did not want David

to think the only reason I ever went to him for something was because of his money. Slim had become a good friend, and I knew the quickest way to kill a friendship was to keep doing bad business deals.

By the middle of the year I still wanted to do television, and although I was discouraged about the prospect of paying to be on WGN, I thought I had found a way to have it underwritten. My friend Holmes Stoner of the Pacific Rim Chamber of Commerce had been touting the laurels of the emerging Chinese market to me for a long time, and he had sent me an article written by a man named Milton Kottler of the Kottler Marketing Group based out of Washington, D.C. The article talked about bringing Chinese products to the U.S. market, and Kottler's company had been doing business in the People's Republic of China for some time.

Upon Holmes's suggestion, I called Dr. Kottler and learned that he and his son Philip were foremost experts on the emerging Chinese market. It was during that conversation that I learned one of their major clients was a company called Jinchuan Group Ltd., a brewery located in Inner Mongolia. Part of Kottler Marketing Group's responsibility was to bring Jinchuan's main beer product to the U.S. under the brand name Ghengis Khan Beer.

After several discussions we came up with a plan that would include a relaunching of the Ring Warriors wrestling brand under the exclusive sponsorship of Ghengis Khan Beer. All it would take was a trip to Mongolia to meet with company officials. It was at this point that I brought in Slim, first because there was no way I had the money to underwrite a trip to China and Mongolia and secondly because he had contacts with beer distributors because of the 14 or so nightclubs he owned. Potentially there was an opportunity for him to make huge money helping to import Ghengis Khan Beer into the U.S.

Before Slim and I would travel to Mongolia, Milton flew from Washington to Charlotte for a face-to-face meeting where we would set up parameters for a working relationship. Quite frankly I think Kottler was a bit concerned about who he was going to introduce to his Chinese clients. He wanted to make sure he wasn't putting Jinchuan together with anyone that could potentially embarrass him or his company. When Milton came to Charlotte and saw that Slim was a business owner who had his own office building and a large support staff, his mind was put at ease. We came up with a whole plan that not only would include Ghengis Khan Beer underwriting Ring Warriors, but that would develop a group of Chinese-born wrestlers so we could eventually bring live shows back to the People's Republic of China. Milton would be traveling to Mongolia in a few weeks, and he wanted us to go with him so he could introduce us to the Jinchuan brewery executives. Although I tried to get time off from my regular job, I wasn't able to go. Slim went

to Mongolia to meet with the Chinese officials himself.

When he came back from China, Slim was very upbeat about the whole prospect of the Chinese market but thought it would take way too long to bring the beer to the U.S. and instead suggested I work with Milton to try to bring a wrestling tour to China — Slim thought that maybe we could shoot television there and show it back in the U.S. in advance of Ghengis Khan hitting the U.S. market.

Within a very short period of time it looked as though Milton and I were able to coordinate the very first pro wrestling tour ever to go to China, but because of the ongoing SARS epidemic that was plaguing mainland China at the time, the sponsors thought the idea of having large groups of people in one place would be a bad idea, so the tour was put on hold. I would continue to work with Milton to find a time to go, perhaps later in the year.

Unbeknownst to either Slim or I, Rick Nelson had also begun working on putting a tour of China together. Rick's father had some business contacts, and one of those contacts was a friend of Brett Favre. Favre's contact was a man named Ed Cunningham who worked for Clear Channel Communications, and it was Ed who had the contact in China. Although Rick's contact wasn't exactly a direct line to him, his conversations with Ed started taking a serious turn, and at that point Rick brought Slim into the picture.

Appreciating that both Rick and I were working on pretty much the same goal, Slim thought it would be best to bring us together. Not wanting to create a rift either between he and I or he and Rick, Slim suggested we all work together. The plan seemed logical.

By the end of the summer it looked like Rick's deal was going to come to fruition first, and when he signed the contact with the Chinese government, I was actually pretty shocked that he kept up his end of the agreement and brought me in as a partner. I had gotten so used to people in the wrestling business being full of crap that it was a breath of fresh air when Rick proved that he was a standup guy.

Even though Rick had a pretty good idea of the talent he wanted to take on the 10-day tour, since I was a one-third partner he let me choose some too. While Rick brought Chris Hamrick, Terry Taylor and "Dr. Death" Steve Williams, Slim got to choose Jeff Justice and Andrue Bain — both of who worked for he and Rick in Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling. He also chose two strippers to be our valets. Neither Dakota nor Harley had any prior wrestling experience, but they looked good, and that was why they were chosen. The four wrestlers I chose to go were former NWA champ Mike Rapada, former NWA junior champ Lex Lovett, Jeff "Bruiser" Bradley and Steve Madison. At the last minute Madison got cold feet,

however, and was replaced by Frankie Capone, who had worked on and off for me in Florida but was a good hand and a regular for Ron Niemi's IPW. Because our tour would be taking place over the Christmas and New Year holidays, neither Buck Q nor the Heavenly Bodies were able to get away. I also got to book one of the two referees, former ECW ref Mike Kehner.

When I told Fred Rubenstein that I was going to China, I could only laugh when he paraphrased the old "Only Nixon can go to China" quote with "Only Brody can go to China." When I was NWA president and Fred was one of my confidants, he used to say, "Only Nixon can go to China and only Brody can go to Japan." The quote was not one of disrespect for others in the organization that had yet to travel to Japan, but rather one of support for me at a time when several then NWA members were upset that Dan Severn and I went to Yokohama for Dan to drop the title to Naoya Ogawa.

The first day of the tour was nothing but travel as the group converged in Los Angeles the day after Christmas for the 11:20 p.m. flight on China Southern Airlines to Guangzhou, People's Republic of China.

We lost a day passing over the International Dateline, something some of the boys were not able to figure out, and we arrived in Guangzhou at 6:20 a.m. local time. As we disembarked it seemed to be very foggy. We quickly learned that it wasn't fog at all, just the dense smog that hovered above the city. Most days we could not even see blue in the sky. We made it through quarantine, immigration and customs, and we were greeted by a small group of Chinese government officials who presented us with traditional Chinese flower arrangements, symbolic of good luck, good will, friendship and prosperity. As we were standing in line and waiting to board our coach to be taken to the hotel, Chris Hamrick delivered what proved to be the line of tour. Noticing what could only be perceived by the Chinese people as all these larger-than-life workers carrying these larger-than-life flowers, Chris nonchalantly asked, "Did Bert Prentice book this?" The timing was perfect as it broke the little bit of tension that always goes along with the unknown. For those unfamiliar with him, Prentice is a Nashville-based promoter who lives an alternative lifestyle.

After a short coach ride, we arrived at the Ocean Hotel, a four-star establishment, for the start of our first full day in Guangzhou. Following an all-hands meeting, during which every person was informed of what was expected of each of them on the tour, it was then time for a little rest and relaxation.

At 3:45 we caught the coach to Tianhe Stadium, where we had an all-hands press conference and a meet-and-greet introduction with first-time pro wrestling fans. The press conference was very ceremonial, as the entire crew was introduced to the

Chinese national press and the group fielded a diversity of questions through our government appointed translator, Lynn Linn.

As we finished the first part of the press conference, we were escorted outside to the front of the arena for the meet-and-greet portion and a chance to win a million yen in the National Sports Lottery. How many people could there possibly be waiting for us?" I asked myself, "100? 200?" As we turned out of the side entrance, we were greeted by a sea of people with the only barricades between us being the Chinese national police. A quick estimation pegged the crowd to be in the neighborhood of 10,000, give or take.

When introductions of the wrestlers were made to the crowd by our host, the director of the arena, the reaction was very warm as everyone got a nice round of applause. But the biggest pops of the afternoon went to Jeff Bradley (who proclaimed he was going to win the one million yen lottery), Dakota (simply because she's Dakota and the Chinese seemed fascinated by a healthy young American blonde), Andrue Bain (who ripped off his shirt and struck a strong man pose for the crowd) and Lex Lovett (who did an impromptu standing backflip about six inches from the top of the arena's red-carpeted staircase — yes, we received the red-carpet treatment).

As we came down the stairs the sea of people parted as if Moses had raised his staff, and we were led to an outside pavilion for our chance to win one million yen (about $122,000). For a hundred yuen (about $8) we got 30 chances to win the prize. Needless to say, nobody from our crew took the grand prize, but it was fun to try. Rick Nelson, being the character he is, kept telling me that if I won the big jackpot he would get half.

After this we headed back inside for a final round of questions from the press. Frankie Capone volunteered to demonstrate some basic moves with Steve Williams. It got a little out of hand, and Doc was a bit stiff, causing Frankie to cry in pain (wink-wink-nudge-nudge) and all the boys, including Terry Taylor, tried to pull Doc off. Taylor inadvertently got knocked on his butt, which resulted in some targeted insults and a near brawl. Eventually cooler heads prevailed, but there was still a little tension.

From there it was time for a private dinner with Chinese government and provincial dignitaries and members of the Guangzhou press.

On the third day we set up of the ring and put on an open practice for the press. The next day, with the first show still several hours away, I could see the nerves starting to settle in. The boys didn't know what to expect. Would we flop? Would the crowd grow tired of American wrestling quickly? Would there even be a crowd? There's one thing to have 10,000 people show up to a free event, but how many

people will buy tickets? Mike Rapada, in attempting to keep up with his exercise routine, decided to take his running to the streets of Guangzhou. The pollution was so thick that it winded him early, something that would come back to haunt him later on.

Shortly after 4:00, Lynn Linn and Benson Tan (who worked for our sponsor) picked us up at the hotel and escorted us via coach to Tianhe Gymnasium for the first show. The building was imposing. Ten thousand seats, giant television screens, armed military security — whoever wasn't nervous was lying.

Like many shows in the States, the first show in Guangzhou was slated to start at 7:30 p.m. At 6:45 the doors opened up, and the first wave of people began filling the seats. By 7:15 the building looked maybe 25 percent full. Lynn notified me we would start at 7:45 instead of 7:30, and I let the boys in the back know. Not good, I thought. I asked Kenneth Chang, our government and sponsor liaison, what they were looking at for the show to be a success. He eyeballed the crowd and said "5,000." We were nowhere close. The clock was ticking.

But then at 7:35 a mad rush of thousands of fans entered the building. One of the sponsors was an air conditioning factory that bought tickets for its workers. It was now 7:45, and it looked like we met our goal, but regardless it was time to start. The lights went out then hit the ring. Show time!

The first match was Mike Rapada versus Jeff Justice. Imagine going back in time to when wrestling was first coming into its own in the U.S. on television. Or better yet, imagine being in Japan in the 1950s, when pro wrestling first emerged with the likes of Rikidōzan. What would fans "pop" for? Showmanship? Athleticism? Strength? Physiques? That's what we encountered in China. Since this was a "virgin" crowd, the fans basically "popped" on everything from collar-and-elbow tie-ups to flying dropkicks. The only low point of the first match, if you could call it that, is both men ran out of steam earlier than expected. The air quality played a major factor, and Rapada wished he hadn't gone running that morning.

When it was all said and done, two new champions were crowned — Chris Hamrick and "Dr. Death" Steve Williams won the NWA Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling junior and heavyweight titles respectively — and some new stars shined brightly in China. The names Andrue Bain, Bruiser Bradley and Dakota would not soon be forgotten to the 7,500 in attendance.

New Year's Eve day started (after breakfast) with a shopping trip to Beijing Street. After getting back to the hotel for a chance to freshen up, we re-boarded the coach for our cross-city trek to the Huadu District of Guangzhou for another scheduled meet and greet, National Sports Lottery attempt, press conference and photo shoot.

Due to the traffic problems we arrived at our destination so late that we had missed our own press conference as well as the National Sports Lottery drawing. About 1,500 people waited. We did a quick photo shoot in front of the stadium, ate McDonald's hamburgers for lunch and headed back to the hotel — another two-hour jaunt. The best part of the ride for me was having the chance to speak with Doc. We told some of the boys Herb Abrams stories, and Doc told us about some of his exploits on the road in Japan with Terry Gordy, Sabu and others.

Because of the long ride to the Huadu District of Guangzhou, plans called for us to stay overnight at a different hotel. We arrived in Huadu and checked into the New Century Hotel, a plush 5-star establishment. We had an hour to get settled before we met up for lunch with city officials including the mayor.

Before long, we were back on the coach for the 10-minute drive to Huadu Stadium. It was huge, holding 40,000. No way in hell were we going to fill it — but apparently that was never the intention of our hosts. The set up was to accommodate 10,000 people. Once again we had a 7:30 p.m. start time. This time we began closer to 8:00 and at 7:30 there were maybe 2,000 people sitting in the stands. By 7:55 that number had tripled. I later found out the final count was 6,100.

I finally inquired as to why so many fans came in at the last moment. Was it because there was another factory sponsor? No. Apparently, in China, because everything is government operated, whenever they have concerts or sporting events, they drop ticket prices to half of the normal amount 15 minutes before show time. Many people know this and wait for the very last minute to buy.

Once again the crowd was virginal and popped on pretty much everything. This time out a little comedy was added, and the fans ate it up. I had an interesting view. Because of the language barrier, for the second show in a row I was left in charge of sound and lighting, ensuring all the music cues were hit. And aside from one or two screw-ups, I did a pretty good job. Because we were in a stadium, I sat all the way at the top of the facade and thus had a bird's eye view. From where I sat, the show was flawless, and it gave me a good idea of what worked with the crowd and what didn't.

While in my opinion the best match of the night went to Nelson and Hamrick, one of the better encounters featured Doc and Taylor, who worked their asses off — not that others didn't, but these pros took it up a notch. They switched things up, and Taylor took on the role of the heel. He was working on a bum knee — you could tell he was hurt, but he sucked it up. And Doc . . . well, he's Doc, and I've always liked the way he works. These two veterans went all out and gave China its very first hardcore match, with everything short of blood, which was forbidden.

After the match (the last of the night), I went downstairs to the locker room

and congratulated everyone. The first person I saw was Taylor and so I said to him, "Great match." Before I could say anything else, Doc chimed in. "Sure, you congratulate him and walk right past me. Fuck you!"

Uh, oh — this is one guy you do not want to have heat with. "I see how it is," he continued. "I'm just a piece of shit! I busted my ass too."

"Doc, it's not like that," I tried to explain, as an uneasiness came over me — something he picked right up on. "Doc, I swear, I meant no disrespect."

A big smile came across his face. "You get hooked easy, don't you?" He was ribbing me.

"Every time," I replied, shaking his hand and feeling quite relieved.

With two shows under our belt, the third and final card was to be held at Guangzhou Gymnasium, a gorgeous arena that looked like a mini version of Tokyo's Egg Dome. The seating capacity was 12,000. While I was working with the stage crew to make sure the ring lights filled in the shadows for television, all of a sudden Jeff Bradley hit the canvas in pain, clutching his arm. In what has to be classified as one of the freakiest accidents in wrestling history, Jeff twisted his arm and, as called almost immediately by Terry Taylor, had suffered a torn bicep. For Bruiser Bradley, the show would not go on. Jeff was driven to the nearest hospital for X-rays. Terry rode along with him, but not just to keep him company; Taylor himself had knee pain. When they met us back at the hotel after practice, Jeff's arm was in a wooden splint and sling, while Terry seemed to be walking better after a cortisone shot.

It was at that time I got a chance to talk to Terry privately. I told him of my desire to be more creative in the wrestling business and perhaps get into writing — because I thought I had good ideas when it came to story lines. At times he looked at me like I had three heads and while I thought he wasn't paying attention, I soon found out he was.

The few hours passed quickly, and it was time for the last show in China. Because it was our finale, we decided to do something a bit unusual for the send-off. Before the first match, all the wrestlers and valets came out one at a time and were introduced to the crowd. The fans were very appreciative. Injury or not, nothing was going to keep Bradley from the opening ceremony, and the crowd gave him a nice reaction when it was announced he was injured and could not wrestle; they really appreciated the effort of him coming out to greet them. For me it was a very proud moment. Although the crowd was a bit disappointing at 3,400, like the previous two shows, they ate up everything we threw at them.

In Taylor's match against Andrue Bain, a little extra comedy was thrown in, and it went over very well. I felt bad for Bradley, however. He sat near me most of the

night, and I could tell he was just dying to work. I think if given the opportunity he would have worked anyway, but the risk wasn't worth it. Because of his injury, we ended up changing the card to include a battle royal. It went over like gangbusters, and we ended the final show with Bain throwing Rick Nelson over the top rope to win.

On day nine I awoke to find a note under my door. Terry Taylor, who had left to join "Doc" in Japan for a couple of shows with AJPW, had handwritten a six-page letter to me on the hotel's letterhead — telling me how much he admired my passion for the business and to stay focused. He wrote that if I thought I had good ideas as a writer to pursue it no matter what anyone said or how much anyone wanted to discourage me. Here I was thinking he wasn't paying attention, and he not only heard every word but felt compassion for me. He didn't have to write that letter, but his words meant an awful lot.

There wasn't much on tap for the final day except an afternoon farewell banquet. Our flight wasn't until early evening. The banquet was at a very nice restaurant, and the Chinese government dignitaries had gifts for all of us, little dragon statues and two bottles of their local rice wine. The overall atmosphere was relaxed, and it was a great opportunity for photos.

When we got back to the hotel, we had two hours to pack before heading to the airport. The ride to the airport was unusually quiet. There was a little anxiety, relief and even a little sadness. We paid our departure taxes, made it through security and customs and finally through health screening. We waited in line for forever to get checked into our flight back to Los Angeles. The rest of the trip was uneventful except for running into Taka Michinoku at LAX. In L.A. everybody who lived in different cities exchanged hugs, said their goodbyes and went their separate ways. Sitting down for some Mickey D French fries, I contemplated the historical significance of what all of us had just accomplished. Would we ever get the credit for it?

Not long after we returned home from China we learned we would be going back in May for a 15-day 10-city tour that would include Shanghai, Shenzhen and Beijing. I was looking forward to the next tour even more than the first; going to Beijing would mean we would get to sightsee at both the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. However, the day before we were scheduled to leave, Kenneth Chang, our contact in China, called to inform us the entire tour had been canceled. When Rick asked when it would be rescheduled, Kenneth did not have an answer, and the cancellation left a lot of egg on Rick's face as well as mine with the wrestlers we booked. Slim, unfortunately, got the worst part of the deal as he had laid out the money for all the airfare. When the tour was canceled, he took it in the shorts — for about $50,000.

The fiasco foreshadowed problems to come with another tour to the Far East that Rick, Slim and I were involved in. While Rick was working with some people he and Slim had done business with previously for some U.S. military shows, my friend Holmes hooked me up with an entertainment company based in Seoul that was interested in bringing some wrestling events to South Korea. Since Rick had done such a nice job of coordinating everything for China, I turned the contact over to him, and within a few months we were slated to do a three-show mini-tour to Seoul in late January 2005. Part of the problem, however, was that Kitae (K.T.) Yang, Holmes's associate, kept insisting on us bringing over all these high-priced wrestlers. While they were willing to pay for it, should something go wrong, we'd be left holding the bag.

Steve Borden (a.k.a. Sting), Dusty Rhodes, Diamond Dallas Page, Jeff Jarrett, Terry Taylor, Buff Bagwell, Kip James, Raven, the Barbarian, A.J. Styles, Gail Kim, Nidia Guenard, Jaime Lynne (a.k.a. Lollipop from TNA) and Malia Hosaka were among the wrestlers who came with us. Scott Hall also went on the tour.

From the start we should have realized there was going to be a problem as K.T. kept replacing the lower-priced wrestlers we wanted to bring, like Chris Hamrick and Jeff Bradley, with the likes of DDP and Bagwell. Even though the Koreans were willing to pay the higher price for more well-known talent and had given us a pretty hefty deposit, according to the terms of the contract, they didn't have to pay us the balance of what they owed until the day of the first show. When we got to Seoul, however, we learned that ticket sales were soft, and the three shows had been cut back to one. The Koreans didn't have enough money to pay us our balance, so they said they would send it to us afterward.

Since Rick was calling the shots, he had to make a tough call. Do we go forward with the show and hope the Koreans live up to their word and send us the balance after the fact? Or do we refuse to go on and instead head back to the hotel and get the hell out of Dodge? Rick called Slim and asked for his advice. Slim suggested we do the show and try to work out the money issue after the fact. He knew neither Rick nor I had any money, and if we were going to get screwed, he would be the one who would again take it on the chin financially. So we did the show. The boys got paid, and, of course, we ended up getting stiffed.

For me, the trip was a waste of time. Initially I had no desire to go to Korea for just a few days because it would use up some very valuable vacation time, but because I had never been to Korea and remembered how fascinating China and Japan had been, I finally decided to go along. Plus I would actually have a job in Seoul as the Korean promoters wanted an American ring announcer for the television special the sponsor was going to present. Unfortunately, any good memories

I have, and there are a select few, are drastically overshadowed by one bad one named Scott Hall.

When Scott was booked I was looking forward to seeing and talking to him. I had met him years ago when he worked for the Florida office and I was working for *Gold Belt* magazine. It had been so many years I wondered if he'd remember me. But I don't think Scott remembered anything — including that he was actually in South Korea. The entire time Scott was either drunk, on painkillers or on a deadly combination of the two. On the first full day we were all set to sightsee, visit a couple of U.S. Army instillations and meet with sponsors and government officials. When we made the first stop at one of the U.S. Army bases, Scott was so drunk and out of it, slurring his words, that Rick asked me to make the ultimate sacrifice: take Scott back to the hotel and get him to his room. I was not happy, but since Rick had to stay with our promoter and our sponsors there was no one else.

Scott was a mess on the ride, and despite a warning from Sting to keep in his seat and keep his mouth shut until we got to our destination, all he wanted to do was talk to me. I ignored him as best I could. When we finally got to the hotel, it was an ordeal to try to get him off the bus, and when I finally got him to his feet, he started crying. I think he knew he was screwing up. He kept saying, "Take care of me, bro," as I led him into the hotel. He started talking nonsense and at one point asked, "Do you know what it's like to shoot someone in the head?" I wasn't sure if he was confessing something or what, but I knew I wished I was back in Charlotte. Luckily I was able to discourage him from heading to the bar and actually got him to his room. Within seconds he was snoozing away.

If there was ever an ugly side to the business, this was it. With a little luck he would sleep it off and be sober enough to wrestle.

With the nightmare behind me, I went to my own room and decided to take a little nap. I had been there for no more than 10 minutes when the phone rang. It was Rick, calling from K.T.'s cell phone.

"Howard, get down to the lobby. I just got a call that Scott Hall is pushing some people around."

"That's impossible," I said. "I just left him in his room."

"If he fucks this up for us, I swear I'll kill him," Rick said.

I went to the lobby, and, sure enough, Scott was sitting at the bar. When I asked someone if he had been pushing anyone they told me no. Apparently Scott was stumbling through the lobby, and one of the hotel personnel helped him to the bar. Instead of leaving him there on his own, I decided to stay with Scott until the group got back to the hotel. That wouldn't be for another five hours, and in that

time I watched Scott drink so much alcohol I was amazed he hadn't fallen into unconsciousness.

Scott Hall's antics in Korea reminded me why it is so important to book people you know and trust rather than gamble on unknown commodities just for the sake of booking a "name." Scott's actions ended up costing him a job with TNA, as both Jeff Jarrett and then booker Dusty Rhodes witnessed firsthand the shell of a man who was once a great performer.

Buff Bagwell wasn't far from this himself during the trip, but his drinking was much more in control. On the day we were scheduled to leave, when the bus picked us up at 7 a.m., Buff already had a bottle of beer in his hand. When I mentioned to Dusty that I thought Bagwell was an alcoholic, the American Dream said with a smirk, "Nah, it's happy hour, somewhere." Although Dusty obviously agreed with me, he knew that the two of us talking about it wasn't going to change anything. All Dusty's comment did was magnify one of several prevalent problems of the business.

But that's how Dusty treated the obvious. Unlike others, Dusty didn't pull punches with me, and although he often had a strange way of communicating what was on his mind, the American Dream perhaps understood the politics of the wrestling business better than anyone else I ever met. While I was working with him on his book — which incidentally we finished writing just before going to Seoul — he explained how at TNA he and Jerry Jarrett were playing poker while everyone around them was playing Go Fish. He was referring to the politicking that was going on behind the scenes, and his analogy was meant to show how far ahead of everyone else he and Jarrett were based on their experience. Without delving into it, Dusty was revealing that the politics of the business was often a drawn out process and sometimes it would take years to fully understand the impact of one's actions.

Perhaps this point is best illustrated by a story that was once told to me by Terry Taylor. When Jim Crockett Promotions took over Bill Watts's territory in the early '80s, Taylor found himself sitting on a plane next to Dusty, who was the booker for JCP. Rhodes was carrying a Sony Walkman, and with a set of headphones on, seemed to tune out everything around him. Taylor, being the cocky little guy he was at the time, started imitating Dusty, and when Dusty removed one of the headphones asking Taylor if he was talking to him, Taylor said no. As soon as Dusty would put the headphones back on, Taylor would again mock Rhodes. Again, Dusty removed one of his headphones and asked Taylor if he was talking to him, and again Taylor said no. Taylor did this twice more to Dusty but eventually got tired of the rib and let it go.

Fast forward to 2005.

Both Dusty and Taylor are working for TNA and attending a barbecue thrown by Dixie Carter, the president of TNA Entertainment. With everyone having a great time and getting along, the unusual social setting enables Dusty and Taylor to have a heart-to-heart talk for the first time in many years, and when Taylor asks Dusty why, years earlier, he was never given the push other wrestlers got, Dusty responded, "The Walkman was never on." Taylor didn't need clarification. He realized that his own cockiness and disrespect for his boss was a factor in keeping him from attaining another level in the business — a level that would have made him more money and put him in the upper echelon of workers like "Magnum T.A.," Terry Allen, Tully Blanchard and Sting.

For the most part, Korea signified an end to my quest to find my niche in the wrestling business. Even though I would be involved in three more wrestling-related projects, those undertakings sought me out rather than the other way around.

Just prior to moving to Las Vegas in May 2006, Fred Rubenstein told me about a guy who lived in Sin City but was promoting shows in New Jersey with him under the NWA banner named William J. Hawkins III (a.k.a. Billy Firehawk). I had actually met Hawk a year earlier while in Orlando at a TNA pay-per-view, when I went down to visit Dusty. Hawk and his wife, Daisy, introduced themselves to me, and I knew the name from my conversations with Fred. Fred told me that Hawk wanted to start running shows in Las Vegas and with me moving out to the same city, there would be good synergy. The way it was explained to me was Hawk would put up the money and I would run the shows. Billy had run shows in New Jersey under a couple of different NWA banners — Cyberspace and Shockwave — and he would load the shows with high-priced talent, mostly from TNA. The problem was New Jersey had a lot of stiff competition, and while Hawk spent more money on talent than perhaps anyone else in the area, there was only so much money from paying fans to go around.

Not long after I moved to Vegas, Hawk held a meeting at his home that included Fred and a guy named Derek Gordon, who Billy had entrusted as his booker. I was there more or less as a consultant, just to offer an opinion if asked. Hawk wanted Fred to take a more active role in the business end of the promotion, with Derek continuing on as matchmaker.

In July Hawk and Daisy traveled to Calgary, Alberta, for a short vacation and to visit her family. Billy and I were set to discuss details about getting a Nevada-based wrestling company up and running upon his return. Unfortunately, Billy never made it back to Las Vegas. While in Calgary he took ill, and at the age of 40 passed

COURTESY DAISY WEI HAWKINS

Billy Firehawk and his wife Daisy

away due to complications brought about from his diabetes. Billy, who had wrestled briefly as the Black Sultan for East Coast independent promotions, had a dream of running a cost-to-coast wrestling company in which established stars could headline while the young up-and-coming stars could have a place to hone their craft. Hawk never realized that dream. In many ways, Hawk's vision for a wrestling company mirrored my own.

Right around the same time, Howard Lipkint, the former WXO owner, asked me to get involved with a new wrestling project. Howard had approached me about it a couple of years earlier, when I was still in Charlotte, but I had no interest then. He'd hooked up with a guy named Steven Mills in the United Kingdom who had somehow acquired the rights to the WXO name and wanted to re-launch the brand. He hired Howard to be his producer and wanted to hire me to be his writer/booker. I knew Steven from years earlier, when he had tried to work out a home video deal with me for Ring Warriors, and I had always thought he was a bit of a flake. Although Steven made me a nice offer back in Charlotte, I just didn't have the time to devote to the project and instead recommended he hire Ron Niemi. Almost immediately he and Ron were at odds. Steven eventually found another group of people to work with who were based in the Carolinas, but, like most of his business relationships, it came apart, and he once again was trying to work out a deal with Howard.

While my first inclination was to say no because I simply didn't have the patience to deal with Steven Mills, Howard convinced me to listen to his offer. Steven wanted to pay me a retainer of $1,500 a month to book his talent and write his shows for him. Since the cost of living in Las Vegas was a little higher than I expected I agreed, provided the retainer would be increased to $2,500 a month once production started. When he agreed, I began working with Steven on the new WXO.

Knowing Hawk's widow, Daisy, had very few friends in Las Vegas, I reached out and offered her any assistance she might need to get through things and cope. I knew what it was like being in a new city on my own, and I could only imagine what she was going through.

We quickly became good friends and began socializing. I fell in love with her over a five-month period, but our relationship never strayed into that territory. In January 2007 she asked me to accompany her to the East Coast for moral support to attend a memorial show that would bear her husband's name. I agreed.

During that trip Daisy and I stayed in New York a few extra days, where we had a meeting with an investment banker named Michael Largue, who I had been introduced to by Howard Lipkint. Although Howard no longer associated with him because he thought Largue was full of crap, I figured I had nothing to lose by talking to him. When we met, he touted himself as a mover and shaker who was once involved with professional hockey — he seemed gung ho to get involved in the wrestling business. He said he could raise several hundred thousand dollars to help me launch a national company if that's what I wanted to do. I went for the dangling carrot and per his request put together a business plan that he could take to investors.

But within weeks Largue just disappeared. He wasn't answering his cell phone, and he wasn't returning calls placed to his office or home. I got that uneasy feeling, and after a quick search on the Internet I learned what had happened. Largue was arrested and charged with second-degree grand larceny, along with a female accomplice named Shawn Payne, who was charged with second- and fourth-degree grand larceny, promoting prostitution and first-degree scheming to defraud. The couple, dubbed by the *New York Post* as "Horny and Clyde," met suspects on a "friend finder" website and hooked up with them in hotel rooms where they videotaped their sexcapades. Cops said the duo then threatened to reveal the tapes to the victims' families unless they coughed up cash.

After a little more research I learned that a decade earlier Largue billed himself as the savior for the NHL's Edmonton Oilers. The big-talking Largue sold himself as an international investment banker and former pro hockey player with all kinds of contacts. He said he represented a rich Swiss banker named Lester Mittendorf, who had $100 million to spend on a hockey team. He wanted to buy the Oilers and keep them in Edmonton. As it turned out Mittendorf didn't exist and Largue was revealed to be the scam artist he was.

While Largue eventually pleaded guilty and got four to eight years for his crimes in New York, for me this was just another swindler in the long procession of fakes and phonies I had met over the years.

Shortly after Daisy and I returned from New York, rumors started circulating that she and I were an item and that I had taken Hawk's place at her side. The rumors were hurtful to her — we were just good friends. Not long afterward Daisy wanted to continue on with her husband's dream and asked me if I would take a look at her wrestling company's finances and business model. Reluctant at first, I agreed, and the more I started uncovering about how Billy had structured their company and run his business, the more I realized what they were doing was a losing proposition. Billy was paying Derek a monthly salary whether they were running shows or not. They paid rental on buildings that even if they sold every seat they could not make a profit.

Finally I sat down with Daisy and asked her if she really shared the same dream. When she confessed that she did not and the only reason she was continuing was to keep Hawk's memory alive, I told her she should consider closing the company down. Aside from reminding her that not everyone she thought was a friend had shown their respect and reached out to her when Hawk died, I showed her in black and white how her company had been bleeding money. Without Hawk's income to help pay for the shows, it would just be a matter of time before she would face personal bankruptcy. Unfortunately, when Hawk passed away he did not have a life insurance policy, and his death put Daisy behind the eight ball. She was faced with a mountain of bills, and the last thing she needed was to try to finance a wrestling show 3,000 miles away. Although she attempted to run one show the following summer, she finally agreed that the best thing to do was pull out of the wrestling business.

While I know I made some enemies on the East Coast by giving her that advice, it was the right thing to do. Even though Billy Firehawk wasn't alive to benefit directly from what he wanted me to do as a consultant, I did protect his legacy by keeping the money-hungry piranhas away from his wife.

On the WXO front, I continued working with Steven Mills, but then a series of issues arose that meant delaying and canceling television tapings. We went from shooting the first six episodes in the United Kingdom to taping them at the ECW Arena in Philadelphia. As soon as the deal started changing, Howard Lipkint bailed, saying he couldn't work with Steven anymore. I should have bailed too. After Steven canceled Philadelphia, he started looking at taping in the Carolinas and then Texas. I had put him together with a number of people who I thought could help WXO, like Rick Nelson, Tony Hunter, Rickey O and "Playboy" Gary Hart. Dates were constantly changing, and with that came phone calls from me to book, cancel and rebook talent. I was pissing off a number of wrestlers, some of who were pretty good friends. While my patience was growing thin, my reputation

was being killed; the last straw was when Steven started playing games with my compensation. Going in I told him the only way I would work with him is if I got paid each month in advance, and for a few months he honored those terms. But when my monthly fee didn't arrive on time I knew he was reverting to form, and after giving him every opportunity to make good, I finally pulled the plug.

By mid-June 2007 I thought that was it as far as wrestling was concerned. Unless something was to fall out of the sky, I had no desire to do anything else. I was happy and content to just work my regular job and live in Las Vegas. But then something did fall from the sky. I received an email from Moshe Jossef in Tel Aviv, the same Moshe Jossef who 14 years earlier was going to bring a wrestling tour to Israel until the WWF frightened him into canceling it. Moshe was now interested in bringing TNA to the Middle East and wanted me to help him make it happen.

While my first thought was to see if I could work out a deal with TNA in which I would get a commission from them, I stepped back and reconsidered my position. Instead of going that route, I decided it would be best if I represented the buyer and told Moshe I would help him put a deal together with TNA for a set fee. Depending on the number of shows he was going to do, my fee would include a set amount plus two roundtrip airline tickets to Tel Aviv to see the shows.

Having met and spoken to Dixie Carter when Dusty was booking there — Rhodes actually tried to get me a job with TNA in 2004 selling corporate sponsorships — I sent an email to the TNA president to gauge her interest. She immediately put me in touch with TNA senior vice president Andy Barton and director of live events Craig Jenkins. TNA worked up a price ($45,000 per show plus air, hotel accommodations and a meal per diem for everyone), set the terms (50 percent paid on execution of the contract and the balance 30 days prior to the event) and engaged their manager of public relations (Steven Godfrey), director of marketing (Dan Stevenson), press secretary (Ross Foreman) and even their director or merchandise (Serg Salinas, who also happened to be Dixie's husband). Although TNA had everyone engaged who needed to be, I got a sense while dealing with them that they were not yet set up to handle international events, and every time a question arose they did not have an immediate answer. It was obvious that while they were the number two wrestling company in North America, they still had a lot of growing up to do.

While Moshe agreed to all their terms, except for the one that had the balance being paid 30 days prior to the event, which was adjusted to a week before the event, Moshe also agreed to my terms which would be a fee of $9,000 to represent his interest for two shows and if a third show would be added, I would get an additional $4,500. Moshe ended up bringing in a financial partner who lived in Las

Vegas named Gaby Bolin, and Gaby paid my fee. However, he was not so quick to part with his money and instead of giving me the full $9,000, I only got $4,500, with the balance to be paid the week before the show at the same time the balance was due to TNA.

Moshe and Gaby put a lot of money into the two TNA shows, but despite all of their advertising and publicity — almost $200,000 worth between television, newspaper and billboards — tickets were simply not selling. Apparently the WWE had scheduled a tour the year before and had canceled their Israeli shows at the last minute due to security concerns. Because of their cancellation wrestling fans in Tel Aviv thought the two TNA events would never come to pass. And even with a lineup that included TNA's top talent, the promoters sold less than 2,000 total tickets. Moshe and Gaby decided to cut their losses, and about 10 days before the first scheduled show, they canceled the tour. Although they forfeited their $45,000 deposit to TNA, they tried recovering the costs of the airline tickets. Bob Ryder, who handled all the travel arrangements for the TNA talent, worked diligently to get the Israeli promoters the majority of their money back from Continental. As for me, while I didn't get the $4,500 I was supposed to or a trip back to Tel Aviv, Gaby did give me $2,250 for staying on top of Bob to ensure that they got most of their ticket money back.

Today, if something regarding doing a wrestling show or trying to coordinate a tour comes my way, I'm more than happy to listen and lend my expertise — for the right amount of money. But the days of me going out and trying to conquer the wrestling world wearing rose-colored glasses are over.

What we call happiness in the strictest sense comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree.

— Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

SIXTEEN

AGAINST ALL ODDS

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Chris Candido overcame his addictions only to suffer a freak accident that cost him his life

Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.

— Michael Jordan (1963–)

There are some things about pro wrestling that are so reprehensible that they need to be discussed.

When you consider the heartache and pain that many in the wrestling business have suffered and start to add up the bodies of those who have gone before their time — not just the wrestlers, but people like Herb Abrams and Dennis Coralluzzo

— you have to wonder if anyone has escaped the perilous jaws of the piranhas that circle and feed off wrestling.

Perhaps that's why the story of Chris Candido is so sad. Here was a guy who was a chronic drug abuser who legitimately cleaned up his act — only to suffer a freak accident at a 2005 TNA PPV. It cost him his life. Unlike other drug abusers I've met in the wrestling business, people who lost the ultimate battle to their inner demons, my heart went out to Chris's family because, after years of abuse and denial, he was finally in a great frame of mind. I remember speaking with him in Orlando at a TNA PPV a few months before he passed. He was in such a positive place, and it was great to see. The last time I had seen him, in 2001, he was all pilled up on Somas. Back then, if he had died from an overdose I would have been upset because I knew him, but I also would have cursed him. Instead, like many, I grieved because his premature death was so ironic.

In 1996, when I first became president of the NWA, I created an Internet-based awareness campaign called the Wrestling Coalition Against Substance Abuse (WCASA) to help those in the business avoid the abundant use of anabolic steroids and painkillers.

I reached out to members of the wrestling press and to the three other major wrestling organizations — WWF, WCW and ECW. Not one of them took me up on the offer to try to find a solution to what was then a growing problem and today is an epidemic.

While I understand why the other organizations didn't join me, I felt the online press, specifically 1wrestling.com, was hypocritical. While they were quick to report on the issues of those who had problems, they didn't want to help raise awareness. I have to believe they didn't want to create waves, fearing they'd be shut out by either WCW or ECW, both of which were feeding them news and information and even allowing them arena access in exchange for positive coverage.

Although several independent groups rallied around my cause, sadly not even my fellow NWA members joined me in the fight — they didn't want to upset the wrestlers they were booking. And so, when I left the NWA at the end of 2001, the WCASA went along with me.

To this day some people get angry with me when I speak truthfully about the wrestling industry. Chris Benoit is a perfect example.

While I knew Chris casually, my heart didn't exactly break for him when he took his own life and murdered his wife and child. And I apologize if I offend anyone, but I really don't care if his rage or his breakdown was drug induced or not. To me it is irrelevant. When someone constantly pops pain pills, shoots a needle in his ass for cosmetic reasons and who knows what else, he is responsible for his

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Nancy Sullivan Benoit when she was known to the wrestling world as "Woman"

actions. You can't blame your employer or the industry for what you put into your body. Benoit paid the ultimate price, but I don't feel sad for him. I do feel for his family, however, and the family and friends of his wife and son.

While some may argue that Benoit's death is the epitome of what the pro wrestling business has become, luckily not every story ends in tragedy. There are some former substance abusers who have actually come back, thrived and become positive role models.

Believe it or not, role models do exist in this crazy, God-forsaken industry.

In May 2005 I took a ten-and-a-half-hour drive from my home in Charlotte, North Carolina, to Cajun country to visit an old friend for the Memorial Day weekend. We hadn't seen each other in nearly 15 years and until a few months prior to my visit we hadn't spoken in more than 10. She had invited me down, and I wanted to get away for a few days.

I pulled up to her house — a nice, older place nestled in a quiet New Orleans neighborhood — a little after 1 a.m. Aside from the change in her hair color and perhaps a little more time on her face — she was 40 years old then — she was still the woman I remembered. We stayed up for about an hour shooting the breeze over a few beers and then called it a night.

The next morning, she surprised me with an offer to spend the day at the Beau Rivage Hotel and Casino in Biloxi, Mississippi. Since I had never been there, I was game, so off we drove in her $90,000 BMW for the hour-and-a-half road trip. Her ex-husband and best friend Harvey had arranged rooms, dinner and tickets to a show for us.

The drive was great because it gave us a chance to catch up, filling in the gaps of our lives. It was inspiring to hear how she recognized where her life was going

and how she put it on the fast track to success. At first glance, you would never guess that this now refined businesswoman with a thriving property appraisal company was once a world champion lady wrestler who had some serious personal issues. She made the transition from fantasy to reality, and did it better than most.

Sunday we spent most of the day walking around the French Quarter. Later we dined in the elegant setting of Emeril's Delmonico on St. Charles Street. For two-and-a-half hours we drank, ate and talked about a number of things including her life away from the business. She told me a few road stories too, like how Sherri Martel potatoed her night after night when she first arrived in the WWF and only after delivering a couple of receipts did she earn Sherri's respect and eventual friendship. She told me a funny story too, of how Luna Vachon left her in a Japanese geisha house after realizing they weren't in a bar in a small city in Northern Japan and the only way for her to leave was by giving the owner her bra.

We closed the weekend out sharing a box of white wine on her backyard patio, reminiscing about the past and speaking about the future. The evening wrapped up early, and I said goodnight and went to the guest room for the last time.

Monday morning I was up early from the sound of someone leaving the house. I had just missed a visit from her father, who I had wanted to meet, having spoken to him on the phone many times but never having met him in person. We shared a final cup of coffee over the morning news, I thanked her for a memorable, relaxing weekend and we said our goodbyes. The weekend and all its little nuances solidified our friendship.

During the long ride home, I replayed the time I spent with her and realized not only how much stuff we had crammed into those two days, but how lucky I was to have such a good friend. I also thought about how fortunate she was to have made a successful life for herself outside of the wrestling business, something most people who try don't do. Considering she came from a family of people in the business — her father, her two brothers, even her ex-sister-in-law — she could have easily gone the other way, convincing herself she was still a star and living in her past. But she was a realist, knowing where fantasy ended and reality began.

Life was good for Robin Smith. And although she had somewhat of a strained relationship with some of the more well-known members of her family, the former wrestler known as Rockin' Robin reflected upon her career as being a lifetime away.

Coming from a strong family myself, I found it somewhat strange when she told me she wasn't very close with her dad or siblings, that she basically just tolerated them. I remembered wondering why it was so common in the wrestling business for family members to be at odds with each other. I knew Bruno Sammartino and his son David didn't talk for a long time, and to my knowledge

COURTESY ROBIN SMITH

Rockin' Robin in her wrestling heyday

they were still not on the best of terms. Dusty Rhodes and his son Dustin Runnels didn't talk for nearly five years. Brother promoters Mike and Gene LeBell from the old Hollywood, California, wrestling office actually hated each other, likewise for siblings George and Sandy Scott. Even the Funks, Dory Jr. and Terry, had their issues over the years. And when Jerry Jarrett didn't show up to his daughter-in-law's funeral in mid-2007, one had to wonder if his son Jeff would ever talk to him again. I eventually understood why Robin kept her family at arm's length, but I shouldn't have been that surprised.

She didn't have time to worry about it, however. Another chapter in my friend's life was about to be written, once again challenging her to be successful despite her surroundings. A few months after my visit, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast. I remember watching the images and videos of the sheer devastation on CNN and wondering if Robin had gotten out in time. I finally received word from her a few days later. Like so many other displaced victims, she found herself living with family, in her mother's home in Hammond, Louisiana, located on the outskirts of Baton Rouge. The home she owned, along with all of its contents, was destroyed.

Perhaps someone of lesser determination would have thrown in the towel, but Robin was a fighter. While she lost nearly everything she owned except for a few personal items, the one thing she didn't lose was her perspective. For her this was just another little setback. With everything she had already been through, she was going to be damned if she was going to let a simple thing like a hurricane get the best of her.

Even though Robin frequently wore a smile, she was no stranger to adversity. Not only was she once the subject of a bet as to whether or not she would live to the age of 40, but she hid a pain so deep and terrifying that it has never been discussed publicly until now, and only with her permission. To paraphrase the late, legendary radio personality Paul Harvey, here's the rest of the story . . .

I first met Robin in mid-1990 by telephone. Ladies Major League Wrestling had just had its television tapings, and Hiro Matsuda called me about sending two girls over to Japan for a two-week tour with the All Japan Women's group. *Baseball Sha* magazine had covered our TV tapings with a nice spread thanks to Bill Otten, so they wanted a couple of girls who were featured in the magazine. I wanted to send our booker (Luna) as a means to open up a dialogue with the Japanese office, and they wanted our champion, Bambi (Selina Majors). The problem, however, was that Bambi didn't want to go because her significant other didn't want her traveling halfway across the world — and because she didn't want to spend two weeks with Luna.

At first I tried to get Penelope Paradise on the tour since she was our Florida champion, and they countered with Malia Hosaka. Malia was still pretty green at the time, and Luna was worried the Japanese girls would eat her alive. Wendi Richter wouldn't go for the money they were offering, and they didn't want Leilani Kai or Judy Martin because they felt they were too old. Then I remembered that Rockin' Robin had just been released by the WWF, and when I mentioned her to Hiro as being Jake "The Snake" Roberts's half sister he said to book her.

I called Robin, and after about 30 minutes convinced her to go on her first tour of Japan. She and Luna really hit it off and upon their return Hiro told me the Japanese office said they did a good job and would probably be invited back in the future.

A few months later I had a couple of live events booked in Florida and brought Robin in to work the shows. The event in Key West was a disaster, and to say I was stressed out would be an understatement. But then something happened that rattled me for a different reason. After the show I went around to the girls to give everyone their payoffs, and I found Robin sitting alone in the back of one of the two vans we had rented to transport everyone between Fort Lauderdale and Key West. It seems Robin had already begun drinking and was half in the bag. In the meantime, Craig Cohen had come up behind me and witnessed Robin making a pass at me and inviting me to ride with her in the back seat for a little hanky panky.

When I thanked her for the invite but graciously declined, everything was just so mater of fact, and she went right back to downing her drink. I told her I would talk to her the next day. It was troubling because I never had to deal with something like that before.

As we moved away from the van, Craig said something to the effect of "Did I just imagine that, or were you asked to go into the back with her?"

My only response was, "Don't say anything to anyone, especially Sharon."

Craig and I had a philosophy of never fooling around with any of the talent.

For me it was easy because I was married and faithful. For Craig it was a lot harder because he was a single guy who really enjoyed the company of women, especially those who were athletic. Craig knew what had just happened bothered me, and while he would have been right to lambaste me for showing up to the building late, he knew to back off and that I had enough stress for one day.

As we drove back to Fort Lauderdale, I kept quiet and replayed that incident in my head. Maybe I was just imagining things. I can't tell you how many times over the years I have replayed that scene. Even when driving down to New Orleans to visit Robin I thought about that incident. Deep down, however, I knew it wasn't the real Robin Smith doing the talking, it was the booze. But what could make someone do that? Did she really have no self-esteem? Or was she just too blitzed to know what she was doing? I would eventually get my answers.

The next day most of the girls were piled into Robin's hotel room, and again she seemed crocked. I excused myself to go to the restroom, and the entire bathtub was filled with ice and beer bottles as if it were a giant cooler. Most of the girls hadn't been to sleep yet from the night before, and Penelope had told me there was a little incident at Luna's house. I was really worried about the Saturday night show in Pompano, but the show itself went off without a hitch.

Robin stayed in town another day or two afterward, and every time I saw or spoke to her she was drunk. She had a serious problem. I began to wonder if that's why she was no longer in the WWF. Had they fired her for being a drunkard? I wondered if she were like that while in Japan, and although the Japanese office said they were happy, how could I know if they really were or not? Robin came back to Florida for one more show about a year or so later, and unfortunately it was more of the same. I also got her the booking for Herb's UWF *Beach Blast* PPV.

For a while she seemed to have her act together, and we talked regularly. But then she got married, moved to New York and briefly fell out of touch. Before long she was divorced and back in Louisiana, this time running her own telephone sales company. For a while she sold industrial chemicals, and then she sold precious metals like gold coins, making a ton of money. When the precious metals telemarketing industry dried up she went back to her crutch of binge drinking, and that's when we fell out of touch. I didn't reconnect with Robin until I started working on Dusty's book, when he told me to include some quotes from Grizzly Smith, Robin's dad. So I called Grizzly, and after interviewing him, I got her number and called her up to say hello. We have stayed close ever since.

I was truly amazed at the transformation Robin had made, and during subsequent telephone conversations we began opening up to each other. I finally got brave enough to ask her how she stopped drinking. I wasn't so brazen as to ask why

she started in the first place. That would reveal itself soon enough.

Robin admitted that she was on a path of self-destruction and woke up one day, looked in the mirror and didn't like what she saw. She quit cold turkey. She confided that it got so bad there are chunks of her life she just doesn't remember. She knew if she continued with her lifestyle she was going to head down the same path as her brothers Aurelian (Jake "The Snake" Roberts) and Mike (Sam Houston). Although she didn't need the incentive, her ex-husband Harvey promised her that if she made it to her 40th birthday he would buy her any car she wanted, which is how she ended up with a BMW. She honestly didn't think she would make it, considering where she had been.

She could very well have ended up like her siblings. Jake's drug, alcohol and family issues have been well documented in *Beyond the Mat* and the WWE DVD *Jake "The Snake" Roberts: Pick Your Poison*. In early 2008 Jake took the WWE 's offer and entered a drug rehabilitation program. He stayed clean for months and began the healing process. By October 2008 rumors began circulating that he had already fallen off the wagon. As for Mike, while he had not been in the spotlight for many years, Sam Houston made an appearance at Greg Price's 2008 NWA Legends convention in Charlotte, where he and ex-wife Nickla Roberts (Baby Doll) saw each other for the first time in many years. But it seems Mike would rather live his life as the former wrestling star he was rather than who he really is. As Robin explained to me, she's not sure if he even remembers how to be Michael Smith. For the past several years Mike has been arrested several times for driving under the influence, has found himself in and out of hospitals on numerous occasions for near overdoses and while drunk has threatened to commit suicide several times. His alcoholism cost him his marriage to Nickla and has affected several relationships thereafter. In early 2008 Mike was released from jail after serving several months for being a habitual DUI offender. Like his brother, he has remained clean for months, but by mid-2009 he too had fallen off the wagon.

What the hell happened in the Smith household that would cause all three children to grow up as alcoholics?

Growing up with a famous father can be hard to deal with. Grizzly Smith was loved by a horde of fans. He was also a local wrestling promoter — and in many cases he was *the* local promoter. He was always well connected politically, no matter where the family moved, and he always made close friends with law enforcement officials.

Robin had an older half-sister by the name of JoLynn who was kidnapped and murdered, and over the years there's been suspicion that Grizzly was actually the

culprit. The incident hit the family hard, and although it never went away, it was rarely discussed by family members. In the back of Robin's mind, however, she always wondered if her father could really do something so unthinkable. And Robin had a good reason to think that . . . as much as she wanted to deny it, Grizzly was doing something unthinkable to her.

Grizzly Smith, the wrestler who everyone admired as the pillar of the community had a penchant for young girls. It seems that, whatever town he traveled to, he always sought out someone underage to satisfy his sordid desires. And unfortunately for Robin, she was an easy target. As she revealed to me in all too graphic detail, Grizzly would take her along on road trips and molest her.

Although Robin and JoLynn were not very close at the time of the kidnapping, they did spend a day together about a week before the disappearance. Robin got the unnerving feeling that her half sister wanted to talk to her about the abuse she was undergoing, as well as her own. While that conversation never took place, there was no doubt in Robin's mind that JoLynn was going through the same physical and mental cruelty she was.

I can't even conceive of the nightmares that Robin must have experienced while growing up. When the person who is supposed to protect you and care for you is the one who is abusing you — well, I'm pretty surprised that she didn't end up putting a bullet in Grizzly's head. If you can't trust your own father, who can you trust?

But Robin reminded me that when she was being abused it was a subject that was not spoken of in public. Unlike today, where there are television specials on the subject, pedophilia wasn't exactly conversation for the dinner table. Nowadays children are better educated on the subject of sexual predators than they were 30 or 35 years ago, simply because there is more awareness. Robin was lucky that her mother got her out of the situation when she finally discovered what her daughter was going through.

Robin said it was actually the act of trying to drink her pain away that made her finally realize what she needed to do to turn her life around. While her father may have ruined her life as a child, she refused to let him continue ruining her life as an adult. It was the act of coming face-to-face with her pain and her fears that allowed her to finally take her life back and overcome the guilt that she had bottled up inside for all those years.

What is truly amazing about Robin, and to me best illustrates her resiliency and inner strength, is that even after everything her father did to her as a child, she can still find a place in her heart to care for him. These days the elder Smith suffers from the onset of Alzheimer's and by all accounts will probably not be long for this world.

GREG PRICE

Robin Smith today — older, wiser and alive

It's Robin's hope that her tragic childhood can help others confront abuses they may have suffered and help them cope with whatever issues they now face as adults.

Although the final chapter is unwritten for Jake and Mike, I'm glad that at least one member of the Smith family swam through the infested waters of pro wrestling and not only survived but thrived.

Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit.

— Napoleon Hill (1883–1970)

SEVENTEEN

FINAL THOUGHTS

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

Sharing a laugh with friend and business partner Hiro Matsuda in Monte Carlo

You have to wonder at times what you're doing out there. Over the years, I've given myself a thousand reasons to keep running, but it always comes back to where it started. It comes down to self-satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

— Steve Roland Prefontaine (1951–1975)

Professional wrestling was, without a doubt, my mistress. For more than 25 years I chased after that out-of-reach dream. Every so often I caught her, and we had an affair. It usually lasted just a short period of time, then I swore her off forever, but

FROM HOWARD T. BRODY'S PERSONAL COLLECTION

As editor-in-chief of *New Horizons* at BCC

always in the back of my mind I waited patiently for that opportunity to be with her again.

I learned so very much from her, not just about her industry but about life.

When Hiro Matsuda explained to me that if my mistress was treated right she would give me everything I could ever want, he couldn't have been more accurate. My involvement in the wrestling business has given me a lifetime of memories and experiences. And when he said that if she was mistreated she would make my life miserable, well, he was spot on there too.

But now I can say without hesitation that my affair has finally ended.

With apologies to Herman Melville, for me, trying to achieve success in the business was Moby Dick and I was Captain Ahab. The only difference is that I survived my obsession by knowing when to give up the hunt. And while I battled what seemed like an endless army of two-legged piranhas instead of a giant white whale, had I continued with my fixation, then perhaps someone named Ishmael would be telling this story instead of me.

If nothing else, I hope you will take away that what I have recounted is not necessarily exclusive to the wrestling industry — the life lessons can be applied to other lines of business too. What I discovered through trial and error can pertain to anybody's self-enlightenment in any competitive industry.

While I may not have ever reached the apex of the wrestling industry, I don't consider myself a failure.

Back in 1979, while attending Broward Community College, I wrote a *Twilight*

Zone–inspired futuristic short story called "Cleats." The story was about an aging baseball player named Zeke Benton who gained legendary status thanks to a pair of magical cleats that were passed down to him by a veteran player when he was just a rookie. During one of the critiquing sessions, most of my classmates ripped the thing to shreds, pointing out its grammatical errors, imperfections and numerous clichés. I took the denigrating analysis pretty hard and was ready to walk away from the class and my creativity. But there was one classmate who pulled me to the side and told me not to let the criticism get to me.

Terri Lewis, who took the class to fine tune her poetic style, reminded me that everybody else who was in our class was there for pretty much the same purpose as we were: to find their inner voice and to perfect their writing style so they could put their inner thoughts on paper more easily.

"Set a goal and stay focused," she encouraged me. "If you do that, you will achieve whatever it is you want to accomplish."

Although she was talking about creative writing, I have never forgotten those words of support, and they inspired me to not only finish that story, but to stick with that class and over the years persist even if the odds were against me. If I had never followed her advice, my life from that point forward would have taken a much different path. That conversation had a butterfly effect.

Despite the criticism from my peers, I changed very little of "Cleats," except for the glaring errors. Betty Owen, my English professor who was also the faculty advisor for the school newspaper I worked on, not only submitted my story for publication in the school's creative magazine, called *Inner Shores*, but, without my knowledge, she entered it in a fiction writing contest.

To my surprise, "Cleats" took second place for Best Fiction Writing at the Florida Community College Press Convention and earned me an all-expenses paid trip to the National College Journalism Convention in San Francisco. I met Sharon on that trip. Had I not attended that convention, I would never have met my future wife, would probably have opted to attend film school at either New York University or the University of Southern California instead of the University of Florida, where she was going to attend, and I could almost guarantee that wrestling would be found nowhere on my résumé.

In early 1981, while attending the University of Florida in Gainesville, I received a note from Terri's mother, saying that her daughter had passed away from complications brought about by digestive problems. Although she had previously battled an eating disorder, the digestive issue developed into toxic shock syndrome and her health deteriorated rapidly. Inside the envelope with her mother's note was a letter from Terri that she had handwritten to me but never mailed.

This gorgeous girl with a beautiful soul, a world of talent and a full life ahead of her was simply no more. Clutching her letter in my hands, I sat on my bed and wept openly. Although Sharon did not really know Terri, she sat with me and comforted me in my sorrow. Aside from losing a classmate in the second or third grade, this was the first time that someone my age who was close to me, and who would have a direct impact on the course of my future, had died.

Even though Terri is no longer with us, her creative spirit — along with the undying spirit of those who longed to feel successful in the wrestling business, like Hiro Matsuda, Herb Abrams, Dennis Coralluzzo, Billy Hawkins and others — will continue to thrive in each of us as long as we set goals, stay focused and never forget the sacrifices made by those who never quite achieved what they ultimately wanted.

Although I never achieved the success of a Vince McMahon or even an Eric Bischoff, I did learn how to swim and survive with the piranhas, and in doing so I am very proud of what I was able to accomplish.

While I know I will get the urge every now and then to do something connected with wrestling, this is my swan song; the so-called end of the line. The love affair is over . . . because I have nothing more to prove to my mistress and, more importantly, nothing more to prove to myself.

In this intriguing, straight-shooting memoir,

Howard Brody gives a first-hand account of how he's been able to survive the world of pro wrestling politics — despite getting his nose bloodied along the way. Delving into his long, trying history with the squared circle, he details important encounters — both good and bad — with some of professional wrestling's most powerful and creative figures, including Vince and Linda McMahon, Eric Bischoff, Paul Heyman, Tod Gordon, Antonio Inoki, Hiro Matsuda, the Funks, Dusty Rhodes, Jim Cornette and Hulk Hogan.

This is the story of how Brody got hooked on the business he describes as a demanding "mistress," how he raised money to shoot a ladies wrestling TV pilot and how he finally wound up in the NWA, serving as its president from 1996 to 2001. It's also the first detailed account of the controversial end of his tenure with one of wrestling's most important organizations.

By exploring the inner workings of booking and promoting shows, and dealing with everyone from talent to building managers while working with radio and television stations, Brody takes you behind the scenes to reveal the truth about negotiating and selling wrestling to networks, sponsors and fans. At the same time, he exposes wrestling's darker side by recounting his experiences with conmen, swindlers, addicts, smugglers, murderers and child abusers.

Covering aspects of the pro wrestling business that have never before been captured on paper, these are, simply, the real war stories. *Swimming with Piranhas* takes you into the battle by Howard Brody's side — into the boardrooms and back offices of the most exciting business in the world: professional wrestling.

Photo Courtesy Bill Otten

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